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BALAUSTION'S ADVENTURE



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HERCULES WRESTLING WITH DEATH FOR THE BODY OF ALCECIS

After the Painting by Lord Leighton, P.R.A.

Balaustion's Adventure

including

A Transcript from Euripides

By

Robert Browning

Edited by

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ELPHINSTONE COLLEGE, BOMBAY

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INTRODUCTION

THE FRAMEWORK OF THE POEM

‘Of the Athenians, the most part perished in the stone quarries of disease and insufficient food, for they received only a pint of barley-meal and half a pint of water each day. Not a few, however, were sold into slavery, being stolen for that purpose by Syracusans, or having escaped disguised as slaves. The rest were at length branded upon their foreheads with the figure of a horse, and sold into slavery. Yet even in this extremity their well-bred and dignified behaviour came to their aid; for they soon either obtained their freedom, or gained the confidence and respect of their masters. Some gained their freedom by their knowledge of Euripides. It appears that the dramas of Euripides were especially popular in Sicily, but that only a few fragments of his works had hitherto reached the Greek cities on that island.

‘We are told that many of these captives on their return to Athens affectionately embraced Euripides, and told him how some of them had been sold into slavery, but had been set free after they had taught their masters as much of his poetry as they could remember, while others, when wandering about the country as fugitives after the battle, had obtained food and drink by reciting passages from his plays.

‘We need not then wonder at the tale of the people of Kaunos, who, when a ship pursued by pirates was making for their harbour, at first refused to admit it, but afterwards

enquired whether any on board knew the plays of Euripides ; and on hearing that they did, allowed them to enter the harbour and save themselves.'

This, which is almost the final passage of Plutarch's *Life of Nicias*, is the point of departure for Browning, and its last sentences supply the hint which the poet has developed into the framing story of *Balaustion's Adventure*.

Nicias had, unwillingly, led the Athenian expedition against Syracuse in 415 B.C. during the Peloponnesian War, had prosecuted it with alternate dilatoriness and energy, and, when finally reinforced by a brilliant fleet and force under Demosthenes in the August of 413, was crushingly defeated, the following month, first in two sea-fights in the harbour of Syracuse, then on land while conducting the retreat of the remnants of his army.

Six thousand captives were taken by the Syracusans from the division of Demosthenes, one thousand more from that of Nicias. The two generals either were allowed to take their own lives or were executed—there is some doubt about the nature of their end—and the seven thousand captives were imprisoned for seventy days in the precipitous-sided stone quarries, exposed to the ridicule of the Syracusans collected on the heights above. Many died of wounds, sickness or starvation. Some were then allowed to exchange this horrible imprisonment for ordinary slavery, being branded with the mark of a horse on their foreheads—perhaps representing the victorious cavalry of Syracuse ; the rest, those who were true Athenians, were left through the winter for six months longer in the quarries. Those who then still lived were put to hard labour in the public prison on increased food, but some escaped from the quarries, and some more fell into private hands. Of these last the fate was often lightened, as Plutarch describes above, their knowledge of Euripides helping them most.

EURIPIDES.

The third of the great Greek tragedians is said to have been born on the day of Salamis, the 20th September, 480 B.C., though a tradition less tempted by great coincidences gives his date as 485. He produced his first play, the *Peliades*, in the year of Aeschylus' death, 455, and during the whole of his life had to compete with Sophocles, his senior and the darling of Athens. His work thus covers the greatest period of Greek tragedy, and was subjected to the severest tests of critical and popular opinion. He won the first prize for tragedy only four times in his lifetime, though he must have competed some twenty times. After his death, the first prize was won a fifth time by a set of his plays produced by his son.

From early manhood Euripides lived in retirement, studying mankind and his art and following closely the speculations of the naturalists and philosophers, among whom Anaxagoras and Socrates were his close friends. This manner of life gave a strong intellectual cast to his plays and brought him into collision with many of the popular views of his day, particularly in matters of religion and patriotism; for this opposition to popular opinion he was pursued with ridicule by Aristophanes in comedy after comedy. The tragic dramatist gave shocks to other orthodoxies also by depicting human passions more nakedly than his predecessors had allowed themselves to do, by pushing female characters and their viewpoints and affairs more to the front, by emphasizing pathos wherever possible in his dramatic situations, and by introducing the latest type of sentimental music into his choruses.

On the other hand, his mastery of dramatic situations, especially of the pathetic, his complicated and exciting plots, his great skill in argumentative debate—the 'thrust and parry in bright monostich' which every Athenian loved—and his sheer poetic splendour always attracted the wise as well as the multitude, and won him finally his place with the other two supreme masters of Attic tragedy, Aeschylus and

Sophocles, for whom the critics had said there would be no fit successor. Of the eighty and more plays which he wrote, only eighteen complete dramas and a number of fragments have survived. Euripides' after-fame has suffered also from the fact that the seven plays each, which are all that remain to represent Aeschylus and Sophocles, are yet amongst their greatest productions, while the larger remnant of Euripides' contains some of his weakest work and lacks many of the greatest efforts of his genius.

EURIPIDES' *ALCESTIS*.

The *Alcestis* is an early play produced in 438 B.C. along with three plays now lost—the *Cretan Women*, the *Alcmaeon*, and the *Telephus*. That is, the practice whereby dramatists competed with a trilogy of tragedies on connected themes followed by a lighter piece—called a 'satyric' play because originally satyrs played the main comic part in it—was still continued as in Aeschylus' time, but it is likely that the contest had become one between the best plays (*i.e.*, one from each set of four) by the three poets who were allowed to compete.

Of this tetralogy the *Alcestis* was, apparently, Euripides' substitute for the 'satyric' play, since the happy ending of the piece, the jesting of Heracles with the sour servitor, the selfish part of old Pheres, the urgency with which Heracles presses the custody of the veiled woman upon Admetus, have, all of them, a comic cast.

The 'fable' upon which the play is based relates that Admetus, King of Pherae in Thessaly, hospitably received the god Apollo, whom Zeus had banished from Olympus to serve a mortal for a year :

'The fault was fault of Zeus : he slew my son
 Asclepius—hurled the levin through his heart.
 Wroth for the death, his smiths of heavenly fire,
 The Cyclopes, I slew ; for blood-atonement
 All-father made me serf to mortal man.'

Apollo, honouring Admetus and his hospitality, wrung from the Fates the promise that, when the king came to die, he should be spared if another could be found to take his place. This neither Admetus' aged parents nor any of his subjects would do ; only Alcestis his wife, out of pure love and honour for him, undertook to die for her husband, and, when the time came, fulfilled her pledge. Heracles, however, arriving at the moment of her burial on his way to perform one of his labours, rescued Alcestis by wrestling with Death and restored her to Admetus.

Euripides opens his play with the departure of Apollo after a vain attempt to persuade Death to forgo Alcestis. Thereupon follows a series of scenes either powerfully pathetic or virilely humorous. To the Chorus of old Pheraian men, doubting whether Alcestis is living or dead, comes out a serving-woman, who relates how Alcestis has been taking leave, with heartrending laments, of her children and her marriage-couch. While the Chorus join in prayers to Zeus to spare Alcestis to her husband, the queen appears, tottering and supported on the arm of the grieving Admetus, to look her last on the sun. In a scene of great poignancy she extracts a promise from Admetus not to marry again and subject her children to ill-treatment by a stepmother, and, dying, is carried out a corpse, while the Chorus lift up their voices in praise of her and in vain wishes for the power to save her from Hades. Heracles then enters, seeking hospitality on his way to the land of the Bistones, and Admetus, skilfully evading a plain statement of his loss, opens his guest-chambers to the hero. The Chorus are overwhelmed by this supreme instance of generous hospitality on the part of Admetus, surpassing even that shown to Apollo when the god came as a suppliant. Old Pheres now comes bearing funeral gifts, and there ensues the sharp altercation between him and the king, issuing in the casting forth of the old man from the palace and the departure of Admetus to the funeral. Into the depths of this gloom breaks the old servitor, who had been

told off to wait upon Heracles, with tales of his guest's riotous behaviour in what he must know is a house of mourning. Heracles, calling him back jovially to feast, learns the true state of affairs, and, moved with desire to match Admetus' generosity with a like gift, sets out to capture Alcestis from Death's hand at the tomb, or, missing that, follow her even to Hades and bring her back. While he is gone, Admetus returns from burying his wife and, plunged anew in grief at sight of his palace, which he must now inhabit without Alcestis, spends himself in lamentations in which the Chorus at first join and then remind him that at least he has his life saved from the catastrophe. Here Admetus turns on them, foreseeing how not only will his life in future be one restless torment but he will also be subjected to sneers from his enemies :

‘ “ Lo there who basely liveth—dared not die,
But whom he wedded gave, a coward's ransom,
And 'scaped from Hades. Count ye him a man ?
He hates his parents, though himself was loth
To die ! ” Such ill report, besides my griefs,
Shall mine be. Ah, what honour is mine to live,
O friends, in evil fame, in evil plight ? ’

To this the Chorus can make no reply save that Fate is all-powerful and that Alcestis cannot be recovered by mourning. Hereupon Heracles returns leading a veiled woman whom, after much altercation—whimsical on his part, sorrowful but determined on the part of Admetus—he obliges the king to take by the hand and unveil. Alcestis being now revealed, Admetus, overwhelmed with joy, still remembers gratitude, and cries to Heracles, ‘ Abide with us, a sharer of our hearth.’ Heracles, however, must push on, and the play closes with a brief hymn by the Chorus on the inscrutability of the gods in their ways, refusing expected blessings and granting the unexpected.

TENDENCY OF EURIPIDES' PLAY.

Euripides may be said, therefore, to accept the frame of conventions of his day—the supreme duty of hospitality and the special honour due to the hospitable; the absolute supremacy of the king in non-democratic states like Phærae; his right to expect submission, even to death for his sake, from all his subjects, including his parents; the naturalness of Alcestis' self-sacrifice for him, a subject for her king as well as a wife for her husband and lord. The Greek dramatist's purpose is to extract, from circumstances which bring out all these accepted ideas in the strongest light, the maximum of poignancy and that pathos for which he was almost notoriously famous. It is significant that he criticizes nobody, least of all Admetus.

The views of the Chorus, generally taken as the surest indication of the mind of the poet, are that Admetus stands unquestionably within his rights in expecting a substitute for himself; the king is never addressed by the Chorus save with words of the deepest sympathy and respect. Admetus is, in Euripides, a noble king, magnificent in hospitality, and loved, therefore, by gods as well as men; it is his terrible misfortune that, when he looks for one to die for him—as a retainer might fling his body before his lord's and intercept sword or spear in a battle—none is found willing save the one he can least do without, Alcestis his wife. He is, however, perfectly right, according to ancient views, in accepting her self-sacrifice, though the necessity of her loss cannot weaken in the least his passion of grief. He is, in fact, a tragic figure, great and noble, one who suffers not so much through his own fault as by Fate.

The Fates it is who have brought things to this pass, and it is with the Fates and their messenger Death that the weepings and prayers of Admetus and the Chorus and the intercession of Apollo and the final successful intervention of Heracles have to do. The one despicable character is Phæros.

Alcestis receives her due meed of praise for offering youth, beauty, the joy of happy motherhood at the feet of Admetus, but it was, after all, her duty so to do ; the special praise that she receives is for sacrificing herself out of love and without request, and here she is designed as a blinding contrast with Pheres.

BROWNING'S INTERPRETATION ; ITS CONTRASTING TENDENCY.

When Browning's poem is approached, it is seen that the modern poet has rehandled the ancient play to suit entirely different conceptions of right and wrong. Gone is the Greek emphasis on the supreme virtue of hospitality ; gone, likewise, the king's almost divine rights over his subjects and his wife. Substituted are all our modern conceptions of individual rights to life, and especially of the equality of the wife to the husband, which very soon becomes a superiority to him, either because her preservation seems more necessary to the upbringing of the children and the continuance of the family upon which moderns lay so much emphasis, or because Woman has obtained, from being the poetic symbol of most male ideals and aspirations, a sanctity which covers all actual women, whatever their personalities or characters.

The effect of this substitution of modern views is the complete negation of Euripides' purpose, which was to show a great king placed in a desperate and pathetic situation and the rescue of him from it in reward for his noble and self-forgetful hospitality to the godlike Heracles. By depriving Admetus of his ancient kingly authority Browning changes the whole face of the story. It is now possible to regard the king of Pherae as a mere man, and the situation he is in as a struggle for self-preservation at all costs, and that is exactly what it comes to in the modern poet's hands. The change of view-point is, of course, perfectly permissible so long as it is remembered that the ' transcript from Euripides ' is one which

transposes the ancient dramatist not only into a modern tongue but also into modern ways of thought.

A modernisation being determined upon, the original tale can be turned so as to bear any one of a score of interpretations. Browning is treating Euripides as Euripides treated the 'fable' of Alcestis, that is with the completest liberty to emphasize any aspect of his material he preferred and, while keeping the main outlines of the story, breathe what spirit he liked into the persons of the traditional narrative and make its content express the meaning that most appealed to him.

Browning, as is evident from the tendency of all his poetic work, will choose that the Alcestis legend should be turned so as to involve one of its leading personages in a struggle of the soul. This character being placed in the centre of the stage, spot-lights will be thrown upon him from a number of angles so as to reveal every turn of the struggle and, in doing so, bring to light 'incidents in the development of a soul' by the side of which, Browning had long before resolved, 'nothing else was worth study.'

Thus, in Browning's transcript, Admetus is selected for analysis, and the nature of his struggle is to be that mere life was so dear to him that he accepted, years before, the offer of Alcestis to die for him according to Apollo's compact with the Fates. The 'plot' being so arranged, interest now centres on watching how Browning works upon the text of Euripides so as to make the Greek's speeches and choruses bear this totally different interpretation.

The method followed is twofold :—(a) The employment of Balaustion in the rôle of commentator as well as rhapsodist, underlining whatever in the original text allows of the new interpretation and adding stage-descriptions which make the actors' gestures and attitudes support it. (b) The summarisation, almost to the point of extinction, of all Euripidean matter not relevant to the new interpretation. Whatever is given is, however, translated with scrupulous fairness, not only to the meaning but to the spirit of the original text—a

vindication, if one is necessary, of Browning's professed love for his author, but also a proof of the plasticity of the Euripidean material.

Admetus, therefore, becomes a characteristic Browning figure. His life, previous to the opening of the play, has been gracious and easy, and has left his soul in an undeveloped and childish condition. He has accepted the gift of Apollo and the submission of his Pheraian people as natural. He is to awaken to the meaning of the gift and the hollowness of the submission, and herein lies the purpose of the play. Browning thereupon leads him step by step, through the contacts which the scenes of the play afford, to a recognition of the blankness of life without Alcestis, then to the discovery of his own cowardice in not facing death and the folly of accepting life from the hands of the one person whose loss made that life worthless, finally to a manly resolve to dedicate the life given him to the memory of her who gave and to the upbringing of their children, a resolve tested and triumphantly vindicated when Heracles offers him the veiled woman. Admetus goes into the play a selfish child and comes out a tried man. The fascination to Browning is to reveal, in the king's speeches, the twisted paths of self-ignorance and self-love in the human soul.

The change of emphasis in the portrayal of Admetus necessarily alters the appearance of the other leading characters, Pheres alone remaining what he is in Euripides, the old miser of life. First to be altered is Alcestis. In Euripides she is the Greek ideal wife who, from the necessity of her position as well as her nature, gives all to her husband, even her life. That this last gift costs her much Euripides leaves us in no manner of doubt, making the woman-servant relate all the agony of her leave-takings in the palace and allowing us to see the final suffering of her parting from the children and all that life promised her.

At this point there is an omission which probably seemed natural to the Greek: Alcestis takes no farewell of Admetus.

In the ancient Greek, as in the ancient and modern Oriental view, this would be no indication of lack of love for him nor, above all, would it imply criticism of him ; her attitude to him through life has been the ancient one of acceptance of his will in all things, a proud and happy submission of the wife to her lord, and now, at the end, there is no more need of a show of love in words than there was in life : by dying for him she has given the last proof of her wifehood, and she departs, grieving only that certain duties of her motherhood remain unfulfilled, viz. the marriage of her son and daughter, and her final word is to hand over this duty of wedded life to her husband for accomplishment.

Here it is that Browning seizes upon his material with real violence and makes it bear an impress never designed by Euripides. Alcestis' silence to Admetus is construed as a sign that she has discovered a hollowness in him which leaves no basis for such a love as hers, and her delivery of the children to his charge is interpreted as a test of his constancy to her memory, a test which, one imagines while reading Browning, Alcestis herself does not expect Admetus to sustain. Nowhere else in the play does the divergence of the two poets' views stand out so glaringly, yet, it must be repeated, both are dramatically permissible, though they are mutually exclusive.

It follows that the final scene must bear diverse interpretations in Euripides and in Browning. In the Greek play the return of Alcestis is a simple restoration and reunion scene, and the audience is only asked to find pleasure in its foreknowledge of the identity of the veiled woman and Alcestis and in watching the effect of this revelation upon Admetus. In Browning, on the other hand, it must complete the test of Admetus' fidelity imposed by Alcestis on her departure, and her unveiling and delivery into Admetus' hands must bear the nature of a reward of his vindicated truth, the crown of his now fully developed self-knowledge and self-conquest.

The last of the principal characters—Apollo's small part being neglected—undergoes a transmutation, though less complete, yet significant. Heracles in Euripides' play is, on the one hand, the *deus ex machina* who brings about the happy ending, on the other the leader of the 'comic' movements in the piece. Browning's conversion of the play into a soul-test for Admetus must make a new place also for Heracles in its scheme, and the place he takes has both a general value and a particular reference. In the general, he is the helper of men, carrying his life lightly in his hand, and ready at any time to risk it for men's sake. In particular, he is the model of high manhood, the measure of Admetus' failure to be a man, the sum of the great qualities which Admetus lacks.

While it is permissible for Browning to give Euripides' play an entirely new bent and purpose, it is permissible also for a modern reader to prefer the old interpretation. One great superiority must be allowed the modern poet, viz., that he has immensely enriched the psychological content of the play and produced a fascinating study of the human soul in conflict amid affairs of the greatest consequence to it. The cost of this achievement is, however, great: Admetus' character is nearly ruined, Alcestis becomes far too like a prig to be pleasant, and it is doubtful whether Heracles gains, in the reader's eyes, by having his jovially courageous personality overlaid with a cast of thought that changes him into a successful spiritual hero, a robust counterpart to Tennyson's King Arthur of the same Victorian period.

BROWNING'S OTHER INTERPRETATION.

Noteworthy is Browning's sketch of yet a third interpretation of the Alcestis legend put into Balaustion's mouth in the end. Here both the increased humanitarian framework of the proposed play and the subtle untying of the knot when Persephone refuses Alcestis' sacrifice are very characteristic of the poet. That his nature contained a rich humanitarian,

as distinct from human, vein his early works particularly bear witness, in especial *Paracelsus*, *Sordello*, and *Pippa Passes*. Now, thirty years later, while the poet's dreams of human good remain as bright as ever, there has been added the rather damping experience that such dreams generally remain dreams, even though an Alcestis is ready to die for their fulfilment.

BROWNING'S STYLE.

Balaustion's Adventure bears some of the characteristic marks of Browning's later diction, expressive of a desire for strength of utterance and emphasis, or else for rapidity. So, in pursuit of his former end, he alliterates :

'Then a fear flitted o'er the wife's white face,'—
'Then frowned the father';

and

'Planets and the pale populace of heaven,
The mind of man, and all that's made to soar!'

or welds compound nouns into a line :

'The uprush and the outburst, the onslaught
Of Death's portentous passage through the door';

or abbreviates prepositions :

'Show what delusions steadied him i' the straight
O' the path';

or drops articles or relative pronouns :

'Chant proper paeon to the God below';

and

'He was once more the man might gain so much';

or combines two effects :

'Thro' faintest touch of finest finger-tips,'

and

‘ O the feeble duckings-down at destiny,’

and

‘ In musings burdensome to breast before,
When it seemed not too prudent, tongue should wag.’

The use of these devices is generally for satiric purposes, and in this poem they are not, perhaps, as elsewhere in Browning's later poetry, over-employed and thrust unnecessarily upon one, becoming a mere mannerism.

On the other hand, Browning's additions in commentary on the text of the play contain passages of imperishable glory such as the long simile painting the appearance of Death which begins :

‘ Like some dread heapy blackness, ruffled wing,
Convulsed and cowering head that is all eye,
Which proves a ruined eagle,’

or the half-dozen lines on the ‘ authentic sign and seal Of Godship ’; or, loveliest of all, the lines on Balaustion's name, with their echoing vowels :

‘ Cool leaves to bind about an aching brow,
And, never much away, the nightingale.’

NOTE ON PROPER NAMES

In the above Introduction Greek names have been given in their usual Latinised or Anglicised spelling—Nicias, Alcestis, Admetus, Aeschylus, Sophocles. But when Browning wrote he followed a fashion which had been set by Grote, the historian, of reproducing the Greek names as closely as is possible in English—Nikias, Alkestis, Admetos, Aischulos, Sophokles; and this spelling accordingly is adhered to in the text of the poem.

BALAUCTION'S ADVENTURE

INCLUDING

A TRANSCRIPT FROM EURIPIDES

B.A.

A

©

TO THE COUNTESS COWPER

If I mention the simple truth : that this poem absolutely owes its existence to you,—who not only suggested, but imposed on me as a task, what has proved the most delightful of May-month amusements—I shall seem honest, indeed, but hardly prudent ; for, how good and beautiful ought such a poem to be !

Euripides might fear little ; but I, also, have an interest in the performance ; and what wonder if I beg you to suffer that it make, in another and far easier sense, its nearest possible approach to those Greek qualities of goodness and beauty, by laying itself gratefully at your feet ?

R. B.

LONDON, *July* 23, 1871.

BALAUSTION'S ADVENTURE

Our Euripides, the human,
With his droppings of warm tears,
And his touches of things common
Till they rose to touch the spheres.

ABOUT that strangest, saddest, sweetest song
I, when a girl, heard in Kameiros once,
And, after, saved my life by ? Oh, so glad
To tell you the adventure !

Petalé,

Phullis, Charopé, Chrusion ! You must know,
'This ' after ' fell in that unhappy time
When poor reluctant Nikias, pushed by fate,
Went falteringly against Syracuse ;
And there shamed Athens, lost her ships and men,
And gained a grave, or death without a grave. 10
I was at Rhodes—the isle, not Rhodes the town,
Mine was Kameiros—when the news arrived :
Our people rose in tumult, cried ' No more
Duty to Athens, let us join the League
And side with Sparta, share the spoil,—at worst,
Abjure a headship that will ruin Greece ! '
And so, they sent to Knidos for a fleet
To come and help revoltors. Ere help came,—
Girl as I was, and never out of Rhodes

The whole of my first fourteen years of life, 20
But nourished with Ilissian mother's-milk,—
I passionately cried to who would hear
And those who loved me at Kameiros—' No !
Never throw Athens off for Sparta's sake—
Never disloyal to the life and light
Of the whole world worth calling world at all !
Rather go die at Athens, lie outstretched
For feet to trample on, before the gate
Of Diomedes or the Hippadai,
Before the temples and among the tombs, 30
Than tolerate the grim felicity
Of harsh Lakonia ! Ours the fasts and feasts,
Choë's and Chutroi ; ours the sacred grove,
Agora, Dikasteria, Poikilé,
Pnux, Keramikos ; Salamis in sight,
Psuttalia, Marathon itself, not far !
Ours the great Dionusiæc theatre,
And tragic triad of immortal fames,
Aischulos, Sophokles, Euripides !
To Athens, all of us that have a soul, 40
Follow me ! ' And I wrought so with my prayer,
That certain of my kinsfolk crossed the strait
And found a ship at Kaunos ; well-disposed
Because the Captain—where did he draw breath
First but within Psuttalia ? Thither fled
A few like-minded as ourselves. We turned
The glad prow westward, soon were out at sea,
Pushing, brave ship with the vermilion cheek,
Proud for our heart's true harbour. But a wind
Lay ambushed by Point Malea of bad fame, 50
And leapt out, bent us from our course. Next day

Broke stormless, so broke next blue day and next.
'But whither bound in this white waste?' we plagued
The pilot's old experience: 'Cos or Crete?'
Because he promised us the land ahead.
While we strained eyes to share in what he saw,
The Captain's shout startled us; round we rushed:
What hung behind us but a pirate-ship
Panting for the good prize! 'Row! harder row!
Row for dear life!' the Captain cried: 'tis Crete, 60
Friendly Crete looming large there! Beat this craft
That's but a keles, one-benched pirate-bark,
Lokrian, or that bad breed off Thessaly!
Only, so cruel are such water-thieves,
No man of you, no woman, child, or slave,
But falls their prey, once let them board our boat!
So, furiously our oarsmen rowed and rowed;
And when the oars flagged somewhat, dash and dip,
As we approached the coast and safety, so
That we could hear behind us plain the threats 70
And curses of the pirate panting up
In one more throe and passion of pursuit,—
Seeing our oars flag in the rise and fall,
I sprang upon the altar by the mast
And sang aloft,—some genius prompting me,—
That song of ours which saved at Salamis:
'O sons of Greeks, go, set your country free,
Free your wives, free your children, free the fanes
O' the Gods, your fathers founded,—sepulchres
They sleep in! Or save all, or all be lost!' 80
Then, in a frenzy, so the noble oars
Churned the black water white, that well away
We drew, soon saw land rise, saw hills grow up,

Saw spread itself a sea-wide town with towers,
 Not fifty stadia distant ; and, betwixt
 A large bay and a small, the islet-bar,
 Even Ortugia's self—oh, luckless we !
 For here was Sicily and Syracuse :
 We ran upon the lion from the wolf.
 Ere we drew breath, took counsel, out there came 90
 A galley, hailed us. ' Who asks entry here
 In war-time ? Are you Sparta's friend or foe ? '
 ' Kaunians '—our Captain judged his best reply,
 ' The mainland-seaport that belongs to Rhodes ;
 Rhodes that casts in her lot now with the League,
 Forsaking Athens,—you have heard belike ! '
 ' Ay, but we heard all Athens in one ode
 Just now ! we heard her in that Aischulos !
 You bring a boatful of Athenians here,
 Kaunians although you be : and prudence bids, 100
 For Kaunos' sake, why, carry them unhurt
 To Kaunos, if you will : for Athens' sake,
 Back must you, though ten pirates blocked the bay !
 We want no colony from Athens here,
 With memories of Salamis, forsooth,
 To spirit up our captives, that pale crowd
 I' the quarry, whom the daily pint of corn
 Keeps in good order and submissiveness.'
 Then the grey Captain prayed them by the Gods,
 And by their own knees, and their fathers' beards, 110
 They should not wickedly thrust suppliants back,
 But save the innocent on traffic bound—
 Or, may be, some Athenian family
 Perishing of desire to die at home,—
 From that vile foe still lying on its oars,

Waiting the issue in the distance. Vain !
Words to the wind ! And we were just about
To turn and face the foe, as some tired bird
Barbarians pelt at, drive with shouts away
From shelter in what rocks, however rude, 120
She makes for, to escape the kindled eye,
Split beak, crook'd claw o' the creature, cormorant
Or ossifrage, that, hardly baffled, hangs
Afloat i' the foam, to take her if she turn.
So were we at destruction's very edge,
When those o' the galley, as they had discussed
A point, a question raised by somebody,
A matter mooted in a moment,—' Wait ! '
Cried they (and wait we did, you may be sure).
' That song was veritable Aischulos, 130
Familiar to the mouth of man and boy,
Old glory : how about Euripides ?
The newer and not yet so famous bard,
He that was born upon the battle-day
While that song and the salpinx sounded him
Into the world, first sound, at Salamis—
Might you know any of his verses too ? '

Now, some one of the Gods inspired this speech :
Since ourselves knew what happened but last year—
How, when Gulippos gained his victory 140
Over poor Nikias, poor Demosthenes,
And Syracuse condemned the conquered force
To dig and starve i' the quarry, branded them—
Freeborn Athenians, brute-like in the front
With horse-head brands,—ah, ' Region of the Steed ' !
Of all these men immersed in misery,

It was found none had been advantaged so
By aught in the past life he used to prize
And pride himself concerning,—no rich man
By riches, no wise man by wisdom, no 150
Wiser man still (as who loved more the Muse)
By storing, at brain's edge and tip of tongue,
Old glory, great plays that had long ago
Made themselves wings to fly about the world,—
Not one such man was helped so at his need
As certain few that (wisest they of all)
Had, at first summons, oped heart, flung door wide
At the new knocking of Euripides,
Nor drawn the bolt with who cried 'Decadence !
And, after Sophokles, be nature dumb !' 160
Such,—and I see in it God Bacchos' boon
To souls that recognized his latest child,
He who himself, born latest of the Gods,
Was stoutly held impostor by mankind,—
Such were in safety : and who could speak
A chorus to the end, or prologize,
Roll out a rhesis, wield some golden length
Stiffened by wisdom out into a line,
Or thrust and parry in bright monostich,
Teaching Euripides to Syracuse— 170
Any such happy man had prompt reward :
If he lay bleeding on the battle-field
They staunch'd his wounds and gave him drink and
food ;
If he were slave i' the house, for reverence
They rose up, bowed to who proved master now,
And bade him go free, thank Euripides !
Ay, and such did so : many such, he said,

Returning home to Athens, sought him out,
The old bard in the solitary house,
And thanked him ere they went to sacrifice. 180
I say, we knew that story of last year !

Therefore, at mention of Euripides,
The Captain crowed out ' Euoi, praise the God !
Oòp, boys, bring our owl-shield to the fore !
Out with our Sacred Anchor ! Here she stands,
Balaustion ! Strangers, greet the lyric girl !
Euripides ? Babai ! what a word there 'scaped
Your teeth's enclosure, quoth my grandsire's song !
Why, fast as snow in Thrace, the voyage through,
Has she been falling thick in flakes of him ! 190
Frequent as figs at Kaunos, Kaunians said.
Balaustion, stand forth and confirm my speech !
Now it was some whole passion of a play ;
Now, peradventure, but a honey-drop
That slipt its comb i' the chorus. If there rose
A star, before I could determine steer
Southward or northward—if a cloud surprised
Heaven, ere I fairly hollaed " Furl the sail !—"
She had at fingers' end both cloud and star ;
Some thought that perched there, tame and tuneable, 200
Fitted with wings ; and still, as off it flew,
" So sang Euripides," she said, " so sang
The meteoric poet of air and sea,
Planets and the pale populace of heaven,
The mind of man, and all that's made to soar ! "
And so, although she has some other name,
We only call her Wild-pomegranate-flower,
Balaustion ; since, where'er the red bloom burns

I' the dull dark verdure of the bounteous tree,
 Dethroning, in the Rosy Isle, the rose, 210
 You shall find food, drink, odour, all at once ;
 Cool leaves to bind about an aching brow,
 And, never much away, the nightingale.
 Sing them a strophe, with the turn-again,
 Down to the verse that ends all, proverb-like,
 And save us, thou Balaustion, bless the name ! '

But I cried ' Brother Greek ! better than so,—
 Save us, and I have courage to recite
 The main of a whole play from first to last ;
 That strangest, saddest, sweetest song of his, 220
 ALKESTIS ; which was taught, long years ago
 At Athens, in Glaukinos' archonship,
 But only this year reached our Isle o' the Rose.
 I saw it, at Kameiros, played the same,
 They say, as for the right Lenean feast
 In Athens ; and beside the perfect piece—
 Its beauty and the way it makes you weep,—
 There is much honour done your own loved God
 Herakles, whom you house i' the city here
 Nobly, the Temple wide Greece talks about ! 230
 I come a suppliant to your Herakles !
 Take me and put me on his temple-steps
 To tell you his achievement as I may,
 And, that told, he shall bid you set us free ! '

Then, because Greeks are Greeks, and hearts are
 hearts,
 And poetry is power,—they all outbroke
 In a great joyous laughter with much love :

' Thank Herakles for the good holiday !
 Make for the harbour ! Row, and let voice ring,
 " In we row, bringing more Euripides ! " ' ' 240
 All the crowd, as they lined the harbour now,
 ' More of Euripides ! '—took up the cry.
 We landed ; the whole city, soon astir,
 Came rushing out of gates in common joy
 To the suburb temple ; there they stationed me
 O' the topmost step : and plain I told the play,
 Just as I saw it ; what the actors said,
 And what I saw, or thought I saw the while,
 At our Kameiros theatre, clean-scooped
 Out of a hill-side, with the sky above 250
 And sea before our seats in marble row :
 Told it, and, two days more, repeated it,
 Until they sent us on our way again
 With good words and great wishes.

Oh, for me—

A wealthy Syracusan brought a whole
 Talent and bade me take it for myself :
 I left it on the tripod in the fane,
 —For had not Herakles a second time
 Wrestled with Death and saved devoted ones ?—
 Thank-offering to the hero. And a band 260
 Of captives, whom their lords grew kinder to
 Because they called the poet countryman,
 Sent me a crown of wild-pomegranate-flower :
 So, I shall live and die Balaustion now.
 But one—one man—one youth,—three days, each
 day,—
 (If, ere I lifted up my voice to speak,
 I gave a downward glance by accident)

Was found at foot o' the temple. When we sailed,
There, in the ship too, was he found as well,
Having a hunger to see Athens too. 270
We reached Peiræus; when I landed—lo,
He was beside me. Anthesterion-month
Is just commencing: when its moon rounds full,
We are to marry. O Euripides!

I saw the master: when we found ourselves
(Because the young man needs must follow me)
Firm on Peiræus, I demanded first
Whither to go and find him. Would you think?
The story how he saved us made some smile:
They wondered strangers were exorbitant 280
In estimation of Euripides.
He was not Aischulos nor Sophokles:
— Then, of our younger bards who boast the bay,
Had I sought Agathon, or Iophon,
Or, what now had it been Kephisophon?
A man that never kept good company,
The most unsociable of poet-kind,
All heard that was not freckle in his face!'

I soon was at the tragic house, and saw
The master, held the sacred hand of him 290
And laid it to my lips. Men love him not:
How should they? Nor do they much love his friend
Sokrates: but those two have fellowship:
Sokrates often comes to hear him read,
And never misses if he teach a piece.
Both, being old, will soon have company,
Sit with their peers above the talk. Meantime,

He lives as should a statue in its niche ;
Cold walls enclose him, mostly darkness there,
Alone, unless some foreigner uncouth 300
Breaks in, sits, stares an hour, and so departs.
Brain-stuffed with something to sustain his life,
Dry to the marrow mid much merchandise.
How should such know and love the man ?

Why, mark !

Even when I told the play and got the praise,
There spoke up a brisk little somebody,
Critic and whippersnapper, in a rage
To set things right : ' The girl departs from truth !
Pretends she saw what was not to be seen,
Making the mask of the actor move, forsooth ! 310
" Then a fear flitted o'er the wife's white face,"—
" Then frowned the father,"—" then the husband
shook,"—

" Then from the festal forehead slipt each spray,
And the heroic mouth's gay grace was gone ;"—
As she had seen each naked fleshly face,
And not the merely-painted mask it wore ! '
Well, is the explanation difficult ?

What's poetry except a power that makes ?
And, speaking to one sense, inspires the rest,
Pressing them all into its service ; so 320
That who sees painting, seems to hear as well
The speech that's proper for the painted mouth ;
And who hears music, feels his solitude
Peopled at once—for how count heart-beats plain
Unless a company, with hearts which beat,
Come close to the musician, seen or no ?
And who receives true verse at eye or ear,

Takes in (with verse) time, place, and person too,
So, links each sense on to its sister-sense,
Grace-like ; and what if but one sense of three 330
Front you at once ? The sidelong pair conceive
Thro' faintest touch of finest finger-tips,—
Hear, see and feel, in faith's simplicity,
Alike, what one was sole recipient of :
Who hears the poem, therefore, sees the play.

Enough and too much ! Hear the play itself !
Under the grape-vines, by the streamlet-side,
Close to Baccheion ; till the cool increase,
And other stars steal on the evening-star,
And so, we homeward flock i' the dusk, we five ! 340
You will expect, no one of all the words
O' the play but is grown part now of my soul,
Since the adventure. 'Tis the poet speaks :
But if I, too, should try and speak at times,
Leading your love to where my love, perchance,
Climbed earlier, found a nest before you knew—
Why, bear with the poor climber, for love's sake !
Look at Baccheion's beauty opposite,
The temple with the pillars at the porch !
See you not something beside masonry ? 350
What if my words wind in and out the stone
As yonder ivy, the God's parasite ?
Though they leap all the way the pillar leads,
Festoon about the marble, foot to frieze,
And serpentiningly enrich the roof,
Toy with some few bees and a bird or two,—
What then ? The column holds the cornice up.

There slept a silent palace in the sun,
With plains adjacent and Thessalian peace—
Pherai, where King Admetos ruled the land. 360

Out from the portico there gleamed a God,
Apollon : for the bow was in his hand,
The quiver at his shoulder, all his shape
One dreadful beauty. And he hailed the house
As if he knew it well and loved it much :
' O Admeteian domes, where I endured,
Even the God I am, to drudge awhile,
Do righteous penance for a reckless deed,
Accepting the slaves' table thankfully ! '
Then told how Zeus had been the cause of all, 370
Raising the wrath in him which took revenge
And slew those forgers of the thunderbolt
Wherewith Zeus blazed the life from out the breast
Of Phoibos' son Asklepios (I surmise,
Because he brought the dead to life again)
And so, for punishment, must needs go slave,
God as he was, with a mere mortal lord :
—Told how he came to King Admetos' land,
And played the ministrant, was herdsman there,
Warding all harm away from him and his 380
Till now ; ' For, holy as I am,' said he,
' The lord I chanced upon was holy too :
Whence I deceived the Moirai, drew from death
My master, this same son of Pheres,—ay,
The Goddesses conceded him escape
From Hades, when the fated day should fall,
Could he exchange lives, find some friendly one
Ready, for his sake, to content the grave.

But trying all in turn, the friendly list,
Why, he found no one, none who loved so much, 390
Nor father, nor the aged mother's self
That bore him, no, not any save his wife,
Willing to die instead of him and watch
Never a sunrise nor a sunset more :
And she is even now within the house,
Upborne by pitying hands, the feeble frame
Gasping its last of life out ; since to-day
Destiny is accomplished, and she dies,
And I, lest here pollution light on me,
Leave, as ye witness, all my wonted joy 400
In this dear dwelling. Ay,—for here comes Death
Close on us of a sudden ! who, pale priest
Of the mute people, means to bear his prey
To the house of Hades. The symmetric step !
How he treads true to time and place and thing,
Dogging day, hour and minute, for death's-due ! '

And we observed another Deity,
Half in, half out the portal,—watch and ward,—
Eyeing his fellow : formidably fixed,
Yet faltering too at who affronted him, 410
As somehow disadvantaged, should they strive.
Like some dread heapy blackness, ruffled wing,
Convulsed and cowering head that is all eye,
Which proves a ruined eagle who, too blind
Swooping in quest o' the quarry, fawn or kid,
Descried deep down the chasm 'twixt rock and rock
Has wedged and mortised, into either wall
O' the mountain, the pent earthquake of his power ;
So lies, half hurtless yet still terrible,

Just when—who stalks up, who stands front to front, 420
But the great lion-guarder of the gorge,
Lord of the ground, a stationed glory there ?
Yet he too pauses ere he try the worst
O' the frightful unfamiliar nature, new
To the chasm, indeed, but elsewhere known enough,
Among the shadows and the silences
Above i' the sky : so each antagonist
Silently faced his fellow and forbore.
Till Death shrilled, hard and quick, in spite and fear :

' Ha ha, and what mayst thou do at the domes, 430
Why hauntest here, thou Phoibos ? Here again
At the old injustice, limiting our rights,
Baulking of honour due us Gods o' the grave ?
Was't not enough for thee to have delayed
Death from Admetos,—with thy crafty art
Cheating the very Fates,—but thou must arm
The bow-hand and take station, press 'twixt me
And Pelias' daughter, who then saved her spouse,—
Did just that, now thou comest to undo,—
Taking his place to die, Alkestis here ? ' 440

But the God sighed ' Have courage ! All my arms,
This time, are simple justice and fair words.'

Then each plied each with rapid interchange :

' What need of bow, were justice arms enough ? '

' Ever it is my wont to bear the bow.'

' Ay, and with bow, not justice, help this house ! '

' I help it, since a friend's woe weighs me too.'

' And now,—wilt force from me this second corpse ? '

' By force I took no corpse at first from thee.'

' How then is he above ground, not beneath ? ' 450

' He gave his wife instead of him, thy prey.'

' And prey this time at least, I bear below ! ' .

' Go take her !—for I doubt persuading thee . . . '

' To kill the doomed one ? What my function else ? '

' No ! Rather, to despatch the true mature.'

' Truly I take thy meaning, see thy drift ! '

' Is there a way then she may reach old age ? '

' No way ! I glad me in my honours too ! '

' But, young or old, thou tak'st one life, no more ! '

' Younger they die, greater my praise redounds ! ' 460

' If she die old,—the sumptuous funeral ! '

' Thou layest down a law the rich would like.'

' How so ? Did wit lurk there and 'scape thy sense ? '

' Who could buy substitutes would die old men.'

' It seems thou wilt not grant me, then, this grace ? '

' This grace I will not grant : thou know'st my ways.'

' Ways harsh to men, hateful to Gods, at least ! '

' All things thou canst not have : my rights for me ! '

And then Apollon prophesied,—I think,
More to himself than to impatient Death, 470
Who did not hear or would not heed the while. —
For he went on to say ' Yet even so,
Cruel above the measure, thou shalt clutch
No life here ! Such a man do I perceive
Advancing to the house of Pheres now,
Sent by Eurustheus to bring out of Thrace,
The winter world, a chariot with its steeds !
He, indeed, when Admetos proves the host,
And he the guest, at the house here,—he it is
Shall bring to bear such force, and from thy hands 480
Rescue this woman. Grace no whit to me
Will that prove, since thou dost thy deed the same,
And earnest too my hate, and all for nought ! '

But how should Death or stay or understand ?
Doubtless, he only felt the hour was come,
And the sword free ; for he but flung some taunt—
' Having talked much, thou wilt not gain the more !
This woman, then, descends to Hades' hall
Now that I rush on her, begin the rites
O' the sword ; for sacred, to us Gods below, 490
That head whose hair this sword shall sanctify ! '

And, in the fire-flash of the appalling sword,
The uprush and the outburst, the onslaught
Of Death's portentous passage through the door,
Apollon stood a pitying moment-space :
I caught one last gold gaze upon the night
Nearing the world now : and the God was gone,
And mortals left to deal with misery,
As in came stealing slow, now this, now that
Old sojourner throughout the country-side, 500
Servants grown friends to those unhappy here :
And, cloudlike in their increase, all these griefs
Broke and began the over-brimming wail,
Out of a common impulse, word by word.

' What now may mean the silence at the door ?
Why is Admetos' mansion stricken dumb ?
Not one friend near, to say if we should mourn
Our mistress dead, or if Alkestis lives
And sees the light still, Pelias' child—to me,
To all, conspicuously the best of wives 510
That ever was towards husband in this world !
Hears anyone or wail beneath the roof,
Or hands that strike each other, or the groan
Announcing all is done and nought to dread ?
Still not a servant stationed at the gates !
O Paian, that thou wouldst dispart the wave
O' the woe, be present ! Yet, had woe o'erwhelmed
The housemates, they were hardly silent thus :
It cannot be, the dead is forth and gone.
Whence comes thy gleam of hope ? I dare not
hope :
What is the circumstance that heartens thee ? 521

How could Admetos have dismissed a wife
So worthy, unescorted to the grave ?
Before the gates I see no hallowed vase
Of fountain-water, such as suits death's door ;
Nor any clipt locks strew the vestibule,
Though surely these drop when we grieve the dead,
Nor hand sounds smitten against youthful hand,
The women's way. And yet—the appointed time—
How speak the word ?—this day is even the day 530
Ordained her for departing from its light.
O touch calamitous to heart and soul !
Needs must one, when the good are tortured so,
Sorrow,—one reckoned faithful from the first.'

Then their souls rose together, and one sigh
Went up in cadence from the common mouth :
How ' Vainly—anywhither in the world
Directing or land-labour or sea-search—
To Lukia or the sand-waste, Ammon's seat—
Might you set free their hapless lady's soul 540
From the abrupt Fate's footstep instant now.
Not a sheep-sacrificer at the hearths
Of Gods had they to go to : one there was
Who, if his eyes saw light still,—Phoibos' son,—
Had wrought so she might leave the shadowy place
And Hades' portal ; for he propped up Death's
Subdued ones till the Zeus-flung thunder-flame
Struck him ; and now what hope of life were hailed
With open arms ? For, all the king could do
Is done already,—not one God whereof 550
The altar fails to reek with sacrifice :
And for assuagement of these evils—nought ! '

But here they broke off, for a matron moved
Forth from the house : and, as her tears flowed fast,
They gathered round. ‘ What fortune shall we hear ?
For mourning thus, if aught affect thy lord,
We pardon thee : but lives the lady yet
Or has she perished ?—that we fain would know ! ’
‘ Call her dead, call her living, each style serves,’
The matron said : ‘ though grave-ward bowed, she
breathed ; 560
Nor knew her husband what the misery meant
Before he felt it : hope of life was none :
The appointed day pressed hard ; the funeral pomp
He had prepared too.’

When the friends broke out :

' Let her in dying know herself at least
Sole wife, of all the wives 'neath the sun wide,
For glory and for goodness ! '—' Ah, how else
Than best ? who controverts the claim ? ' quoth she :
' What kind of creature should the woman prove
That has surpassed Alkestis ?—surelier shown 570
Preference for her husband to herself
Than by determining to die for him ?
But so much all our city knows indeed :
Hear what she did indoors and wonder then !
For, when she felt the crowning day was come,
She washed with river-waters her white skin,
And, taking from the cedar closets forth
Vesture and ornament, bedecked herself
Nobly, and stood before the hearth, and prayed :
.. Mistress, because I now depart the world, 580
Falling before thee the last time, I ask—
Be mother to my orphans ! wed the one

To a kind wife, and make the other's mate
Some princely person : nor, as I who bore
My children perish, suffer that they too
Die all untimely, but live, happy pair,
Their full glad life out in the fatherland ! ”
And every altar through Admetos' house
She visited and crowned and prayed before,
Stripping the myrtle-foliage from the boughs, 590
Without a tear, without a groan,—no change
At all to that skin's nature, fair to see,
Caused by the imminent evil. But this done—
Reaching her chamber, falling on her bed,
There, truly, burst she into tears and spoke :
“ O bride-bed, where I loosened from my life
Virginity for that same husband's sake
Because of whom I die now—fare thee well
Since nowise do I hate thee : me alone
Hast thou destroyed ; for, shrinking to betray 600
Thee and my spouse, I die : but thee, O bed,
Some other woman shall possess as wife—
Truer, no ! but of better fortune, say ! ”
—So falls on, kisses it till all the couch
Is moistened with the eyes' sad overflow.
But, when of many tears she had her fill,
She flings from off the couch, goes headlong forth,
Yet,—forth the chamber,—still keeps turning back
And casts her on the couch again once more.
Her children, clinging to their mother's robe, 610
Wept meanwhile : but she took them in her arms,
And, as a dying woman might, embraced
Now one and now the other : 'neath the roof,
All of the household servants wept as well,

Moved to compassion for their mistress ; she
Extended her right hand to all and each,
And there was no one of such low degree
She spoke not to nor had an answer from.
Such are the evils in Admetos' house.
Dying,—why, he had died ; but, living, gains 620
Such grief as this he never will forget ! ”

And when they questioned of Admetos, ‘ Well—
Holding his dear wife in his hands, he weeps ;
Entreats her not to give him up, and seeks
The impossible, in fine : for there she wastes
And withers by disease, abandoned now,
A mere dead weight upon her husband's arm.
Yet, none the less, although she breathe so faint,
Her will is to behold the beams o' the sun :
Since never more again, but this last once, 630
Shall she see sun, its circlet or its ray.
But I will go, announce your presence,—friends
Indeed ; since 'tis not all so love their lords
As seek them in misfortune, kind the same :
But you are the old friends I recognise.’

And at the word she turned again to go
The while they waited, taking up the plaint
To Zeus again : ‘ What passage from this strait ?
What loosing of the heavy fortune fast
About the palace ? Will such help appear, 640
Or must we clip the locks and cast around
Each form already the black peplos' fold ?
Clearly the black robe, clearly ! All the same,
Pray to the Gods !—like Gods' no power so great !

O thou king Paian, find some way to save !
Reveal it, yea, reveal it ! Since of old
Thou found'st a cure, why, now again become
Releaser from the bonds of Death, we beg,
And give the sanguinary Hades pause ! '
So the song dwindled into a mere moan, 650
How dear the wife, and what her husband's woe ;
When suddenly—

‘ Behold, behold ! ’ breaks forth :
‘ Here is she coming from the house indeed !
Her husband comes, too ! Cry aloud, lament,
Pheraia land, this best of women, bound—
So is she withered by disease away—
For realms below and their infernal king !
Never will we affirm there's more of joy
Than grief in marriage ; making estimate
Both from old sorrows anciently observed, 660
And this misfortune of the king we see—
Admetos who, of bravest spouse bereaved,
Will live life's remnant out, no life at all ! ’

So wailed they, while a sad procession wound
Slow from the innermost o' the palace, stopped
At the extreme verge of the platform-front :
There opened and disclosed Alkestis' self,
The consecrated lady, borne to look
Her last—and let the living look their last—
She at the sun, we at Alkestis.

We ! 670
For would you note a memorable thing ?
We grew to see in that severe regard,—
Hear in that hard dry pressure to the point,

Word slow pursuing word in monotone,—
What Death meant when he called her consecrate
Henceforth to Hades. I believe, the sword—
Its office was to cut the soul at once
From life,—from something in this world which hides
Truth, and hides falsehood, and so lets us live
Somehow. Suppose a rider furls a cloak 680
About a horse's head ; unfrightened, so,
Between the menace of a flame, between
Solicitation of the pasturage,
Untempted equally, he goes his gait
To journey's end : then pluck the pharos off !
Show what delusions steadied him i' the straight
O' the path, made grass seem fire and fire seem grass,
All through a little bandage o'er the eyes !
As certainly with eyes unbandaged now
Alkestis looked upon the action here, 690
Self-immolation for Admetos' sake ;
Saw, with a new sense, all her death would do,
And which of her survivors had the right,
And which the less right, to survive thereby.
For, you shall note, she uttered no one word
Of love more to her husband, though he wept
Plenteously, waxed importunate in prayer—
Folly's old fashion when its seed bears fruit.
I think she judged that she had bought the ware
O' the seller at its value,—nor praised him 700
Nor blamed herself, but, with indifferent eye,
Saw him purse money up, prepare to leave
The buyer with a solitary bale—
True purple—but in place of all that coin,
Had made a hundred others happy too,

If so willed fate or fortune ! What remained
 To give away, should rather go to these
 Than one with coin to clink and contemplate.
 Admetos had his share and might depart,
 The rest was for her children and herself. 710
 (Charopé makes a face : but wait awhile !)
 She saw things plain as Gods do : by one stroke
 O' the sword that rends the life-long veil away.
 (Also Euripides saw plain enough :
 But you and I, Charopé !—you and I
 Will trust his sight until our own grow clear.)

' Sun, and thou light of day, and heavenly dance
 O' the fleet cloud-figure ! ' (so her passion paused,
 While the awe-stricken husband made his moan,
 Muttered now this now that ineptitude : 720
 ' Sun that sees thee and me, a suffering pair,
 Who did the Gods no wrong whence thou shouldst die ! ')
 Then, as if caught up, carried in their course,
 Fleeting and free as cloud and sunbeam are,
 She missed no happiness that lay beneath :
 ' O thou wide earth, from these my palace roofs,
 To distant nuptial chambers once my own
 In that Iolkos of my ancestry ! '—
 There the flight failed her. ' Raise thee, wretched one !
 Give us not up ! Pray pity from the Gods ! ' 730

Vainly Admetos : for ' I see it—see
 The two-oared boat ! The ferryer of the dead,
 Charon, hand hard upon the boatman's-pole,
 Calls me—even now calls—" Why delayest thou ?
 Quick ! Thou obstructest all made ready here

For prompt departure : quick, then ! ” ’

‘ Woe is me !

A bitter voyage this to undergo,
Even i’ the telling ! Adverse Powers above,
How do ye plague us ! ’

Then a shiver ran :

‘ He has me—seest not ?—hales me,—who is it ?— 740
To the hall o’ the Dead—ah, who but Hades’ self,
He, with the wings there, glares at me, one gaze
All that blue brilliance, under the eyebrow !
What wilt thou do ? Unhand me ! Such a way
I have to traverse, all unhappy one ! ’

‘ Way—piteous to thy friends, but, most of all,
Me and thy children : ours assuredly
A common partnership in grief like this ! ’

Whereat they closed about her ; but ‘ Let be !
Leave, let me lie now ! Strength forsakes my feet. 750
Hades is here, and shadowy on my eyes
Comes the night creeping. Children—children, now
Indeed, a mother is no more for you !
Farewell, O children, long enjoy the light ! ’

‘ Ah me, the melancholy word I hear,
Oppressive beyond every kind of death !
No, by the Deities, take heart nor dare
To give me up—no, by our children too
Made orphans of ! But rise, be resolute,
Since, thou departed, I no more remain ! 760
For in thee are we bound up, to exist
Or cease to be—so we adore thy love ! ’

—Which brought out truth to judgment. At this word
And protestation, all the truth in her
Claimed to assert itself : she waved away
The blue-eyed black-wing'd phantom, held in check
The advancing pageantry of Hades there,
And, with no change in her own countenance,
She fixed her eyes on the protesting man,
And let her lips unlock their sentence,—so ! 770

‘ Admetos,—how things go with me thou seest,—
I wish to tell thee, ere I die, what things
I will should follow. I—to honour thee,
Secure for thee, by my own soul's exchange,
Continued looking on the daylight here—
Die for thee—yet, if so I pleased, might live,
Nay, wed what man of Thessaly I would,
And dwell i' the dome with pomp and queenliness.
I would not,—would not live bereft of thee,
With children orphaned, neither shrank at all, 780
Though having gifts of youth wherein I joyed.
Yet, who begot thee and who gave thee birth,
Both of these gave thee up ; no less, a term
Of life was reached when death became them well,
Ay, well—to save their child and glorious die :
Since thou wast all they had, nor hope remained
Of having other children in thy place.
So, I and thou had lived out our full time,
Nor thou, left lonely of thy wife, wouldst groan
With children reared in orphanage : but thus 790
Some God disposed things, willed they so should be.
Be they so ! Now do thou remember this,
Do me in turn a favour—favour, since

Certainly I shall never claim my due,
For nothing is more precious than a life :
But a fit favour, as thyself wilt say,
Loving our children here no less than I,
If head and heart be sound in thee at least.
Uphold them, make them masters of my house,
Nor wed and give a step-dame to the pair, 800
Who, being a worse wife than I, thro' spite
Will raise her hand against both thine and mine.
Never do this at least, I pray to thee !
For hostile the new-comer, the step-dame,
To the old brood—a very viper she
For gentleness ! Here stand they, boy and girl ;
The boy has got a father, a defence
Tower-like, he speaks to and has answer from :
But thou, my girl, how will thy virginhood
Conclude itself in marriage fittingly ? 810
Upon what sort of sire-found yoke-fellow
Art thou to chance ? with all to apprehend—
Lest, casting on thee some unkind report,
She blast thy nuptials in the bloom of youth.
For neither shall thy mother watch thee wed,
Nor hearten thee in childbirth, standing by
Just when a mother's presence helps the most !
No, for I have to die : and this my ill
Comes to me, nor to-morrow, no, nor yet
The third day of the month, but now, even now, 820
I shall be reckoned among those no more.
Farewell, be happy ! And to thee, indeed,
Husband, the boast remains permissible
Thou hadst a wife was worthy ! and to you,
Children ; as good a mother gave you birth.'

'Have courage!' interposed the friends, 'For him I have no scruple to declare—all this Will he perform, except he fail of sense.'

'All this shall be—shall be!' Admetos sobbed :
'Fear not! And, since I had thee living, dead 830
Alone wilt thou be called my wife : no fear
That some Thessalian ever styles herself
Bride, hails this man for husband in thy place !
No woman, be she of such lofty line
Or such surpassing beauty otherwise !
Enough of children : gain from these I have,
Such only may the Gods grant ! since in thee
Absolute is our loss, where all was gain.
And I shall bear for thee no year-long grief,
But grief that lasts while my own days last, love ! 840
Love ! For my hate is she who bore me, now :
And him I hate, my father : loving ones
Truly, in word not deed ! But thou didst pay
All dearest to thee down, and buy my life,
Saving me so ! Is there not cause enough
That I who part with such companionship
In thee, should make my moan ? I moan, and more :
For I will end the feastings—social flow
O' the wine friends flock for, garlands and the Muse
That graced my dwelling. Never now for me 850
To touch the lyre, to lift my soul in song
At summons of the Lydian flute ; since thou
From out my life hast emptied all the joy !
And this thy body, in thy likeness wrought
By some wise hand of the artificers,
Shall lie disposed within my marriage-bed :

This I will fall on, this enfold about,
Call by thy name,—my dear wife in my arms
Even though I have not, I shall seem to have—
A cold delight, indeed, but all the same 860
So should I lighten of its weight my soul !
And, wandering my way in dreams perchance,
Thyself wilt bless me : for, come when they will,
Even by night our loves are sweet to see.
But were the tongue and tune of Orpheus mine,
So that to Koré crying, or her lord,
In hymns, from Hades I might rescue thee—
Down would I go, and neither Plouton's dog
Nor Charon, he whose oar sends souls across,
Should stay me till again I made thee stand 870
Living, within the light ! But, failing this,
There, where thou art, await me when I die,
Make ready our abode, my house-mate still !
For in the self-same cedar, me with thee
Will I provide that these our friends shall place,
My side lay close by thy side ! Never, corpse
Although I be, would I division bear
From thee, my faithful one of all the world ! '

So he stood sobbing : nowise insincere,
But somehow child-like, like his children, like 880
Childishness the world over. What was new
In this announcement that his wife must die ?
What particle of pain beyond the pact
He made, with eyes wide open, long ago—
Made and was, if not glad, content to make ?
Now that the sorrow, he had called for, came,
He sorrowed to the height : none heard him say,

However, what would seem so pertinent,
 ' To keep this pact, I find surpass my power :
 Rescind it, Moirai ! Give me back her life, 890
 And take the life I kept by base exchange !
 Or, failing that, here stands your laughing-stock
 Fooled by you, worthy just the fate o' the fool
 Who makes a pother to escape the best
 And gain the worst you wiser Powers allot ! '
 No, not one word of this : nor did his wife
 Despite the sobbing, and the silence soon
 To follow, judge so much was in his thought—
 Fancy that, should the Moirai acquiesce,
 He would relinquish life nor let her die. 900
 The man was like some merchant who, in storm,
 Throws the freight over to redeem the ship :
 No question, saving both were better still.
 As it was,—why, he sorrowed, which sufficed.
 So, all she seemed to notice in his speech
 Was what concerned her children. Children, too,
 Bear the grief and accept the sacrifice.
 Rightly rules nature : does the blossomed bough
 O' the grape-vine, or the dry grape's self, bleed wine ?

 So, bending to her children all her love, 910
 She fastened on their father's only word
 To purpose now, and followed it with this.
 ' O children, now yourselves have heard these things—
 Your father saying he will never wed
 Another woman to be over you,
 Nor yet dishonour me ! '

' And now at least

I say it, and I will accomplish too ! '

' Then, for such promise of accomplishment,
Take from my hand these children ! '

' Thus I take—
Dear gift from the dear hand ! '

' Do thou become 920
Mother, now, to these children in my place ! '

' Great the necessity I should be so,
At least, to these bereaved of thee ! '

' Child—child !
Just when I needed most to live, below
Am I departing from you both ! '

' Ah me !
And what shall I do, then, left lonely thus ? '

' Time will appease thee : who is dead is nought.'

' Take me with thee—take, by the Gods below ! '

' We are sufficient, we who die for thee.'

' Oh, Powers, ye widow me of what a wife ! ' 930

' And truly the dimmed eye draws earthward now ! '

' Wife, if thou leav'st me, I am lost indeed ! '

' She once was—now is nothing, thou mayst say.'

' Raise thy face nor forsake thy children thus ! '

' Ah, willingly indeed I leave them not !
But—fare ye well, my children ! '

' Look on them—
Look ! '

' I am nothingness.'

' What dost thou ? Leav'st . . . '

' Farewell ! '

And in the breath she passed away.
' Undone—me miserable ! ' moaned the king,
While friends released the long-suspended sigh 940
' Gone is she : no wife for Admetos more ! '

Such was the signal : how the woe broke forth,
Why tell ?—or how the children's tears ran fast
Bidding their father note the eyelids' stare,
Hands' droop, each dreadful circumstance of death.

' Ay, she hears not, she sees not : I and you,
'Tis plain, are stricken hard and have to bear ! '
Was all Admetos answered ; for, I judge,
He only now began to taste the truth :
The thing done lay revealed ; which undone thing, 950
Rehearsed for fact by fancy, at the best,
Never can equal. He had used himself
This long while (as he muttered presently)
To practise with the terms, the blow involved
By the bargain, sharp to bear, but bearable
Because of plain advantage at the end.
Now that, in fact not fancy, the blow fell—

Needs must he busy him with the surprise.
' Alkestis—not to see her nor be seen,
Hear nor be heard of by her, any more 960
To-day, to-morrow, to the end of time—
Did I mean this should buy my life ? ' thought he.

So, friends came round him, took him by the hand,
Bade him remember our mortality,
Its due, its doom : how neither was he first,
Nor would be last, to thus deplore the loved.

' I understand ' slow the words came at last.
' Nor of a sudden did the evil here
Fly on me : I have known it long ago,
Ay, and essayed myself in misery ; 970
Nothing is new. You have to stay, you friends,
Because the next need is to carry forth
The corpse here : you must stay and do your part,
Chant proper pæan to the God below ;
Drink-sacrifice he likes not. I decree
That all Thessalians over whom I rule
Hold grief in common with me ; let them shear
Their locks, and be the peplos black they show !
And you who to the chariot yoke your steeds,
Or manage steeds one-frontleted,—I charge, 980
Clip from each neck with steel the mane away !
And through my city, nor of flute nor lyre
Be there a sound till twelve full moons succeed.
For I shall never bury any corpse
Dearer than this to me, nor better friend :
One worthy of all honour from me, since
Me she has died for, she and she alone.'

With that, he sought the inmost of the house,
He and his dead, to get grave's garniture,
While the friends sang the pæan that should peal. 990
' Daughter of Pelias, with farewell from me,
I' the house of Hades have thy unsunned home !
Let Hades know, the dark-haired deity,—
And he who sits to row and steer alike,
Old corpse-conductor, let him know he bears
Over the Acherontian lake, this time,
I' the two-oared boat, the best—oh, best by far
Of womankind ! For thee, Alkestis Queen !
Many a time those haunTERS of the Muse
Shall sing thee to the seven-stringed mountain-shell, 1000
And glorify in hymns that need no harp,
At Sparta when the cycle comes about,
And that Karneian month wherein the moon
Rises and never sets the whole night through.
So too at splendid and magnificent
Athenai. Such the spread of thy renown,
And such the lay that, dying, thou hast left
Singer and sayer. O that I availed
Of my own might to send thee once again
From Hades' hall, Kokutos' stream, by help 1010
O' the oar that dips the river, back to day ! '

So, the song sank to prattle in her praise :
' Light, from above thee, lady, fall the earth,
Thou only one of womankind to die,
Wife for her husband ! If Admetos take
Anything to him like a second spouse—
Hate from his offspring and from us shall be
His portion, let the king assure himself !

No mind his mother had to hide in earth
Her body for her son's sake, nor his sire 1020
Had heart to save whom he begot,—not they,
The white-haired wretches ! only thou it was,
I' the bloom of youth, didst save him and so die !
Might it be mine to chance on such a mate
And partner ! For there's penury in life
Of such allowance : were she mine at least,
So wonderful a wife, assuredly
She would companion me throughout my days
And never once bring sorrow !'

A great voice—

' My hosts here !

Oh, the thrill that ran through us ! 1030
Never was aught so good and opportune
As that great interrupting voice ! For see !
Here maundered this dispirited old age
Before the palace ; whence a something crept
Which told us well enough without a word
What was a-doing inside,—every touch
O' the garland on those temples, tenderest
Disposure of each arm along its side,
Came putting out what warmth i' the world was left.
Then, as it happens at a sacrifice 1040
When, drop by drop, some lustral bath is brimmed
Into the thin and clear and cold, at once
They slaughter a whole wine-skin : Bacchos' blood
Sets the white water all a-flame ; even so,
Sudden into the midst of sorrow, leapt
Along with the gay cheer of that great voice,
Hope, joy, salvation : Herakles was here !
Himself, o' the threshold, sent his voice on first

To herald all that human and divine
I' the weary happy face of him,—half God, 1050
Half man, which made the god-part God the more.

' Hosts mine.' he broke upon the sorrow with,
' Inhabitants of this Pheraia soil,
Chance I upon Admetos inside here ? '

The irresistible sound wholesome heart
O' the hero,—more than all the mightiness
At labour in the limbs that, for man's sake,
Laboured and meant to labour their life long,—
This drove back, dried up sorrow at its source.
How could it brave the happy weary laugh 1060
Of who had bantered sorrow ' Sorrow here ?
What have you done to keep your friend from harm ?
Could no one give the life I see he keeps ?
Or, say there's sorrow here past friendly help,
Why waste a word or let a tear escape
While other sorrows wait you in the world,
And want the life of you, though helpless here ? '
Clearly there was no telling such an one
How, when their monarch tried who loved him more
Than he loved them, and found they loved, as he, 1070
Each man, himself, and held, no otherwise,
That, of all evils in the world, the worst
Was—being forced to die, whate'er death gain :
How all this selfishness in him and them
Caused certain sorrow which they sang about,—
I think that Herakles, who held his life
Out on his hand, for any man to take—
I think his laugh had marred their threnody.

'He is in the house,' they answered. After all,
They might have told the story, talked their best 1080
About the inevitable sorrow here,
Nor changed nor checked the kindly nature,—no !
So long as men were merely weak, not bad,
He loved men : were they Gods he used to help ?
'Yea, Pheres' son is in-doors, Herakles.
But say, what sends thee to Thessalian soil,
Brought by what business to this Pherai town ?'

'A certain labour that I have to do
Eurustheus the Tirunthian,' laughed the God.

'And whither wendest—on what wandering 1090
Bound now ?' (they had an instinct, guessed what meant
Wanderings, labours, in the God's light mouth.)

'After the Thrakian Diomedes' car
With the four horses.'

'Ah, but canst thou that ?
Art inexperienced in thy host to be ?'

'All-inexperienced : I have never gone
As yet to the land o' the Bistones.'

'Then, look
By no means to be master of the steeds
Without a battle !'

'Battle there may be :
I must refuse no labour, all the same,' 1100

'Certainly, either having slain a foe
Wilt thou return to us, or, slain thyself,
Stay there !'

'And, even if the game be so,
The risk in it were not the first I run.'

'But, say thou overpower the lord o' the place.
What more advantage dost expect thereby ?'

'I shall drive off his horses to the king.'

'No easy handling them to bit the jaw !'

'Easy enough ; except, at least, they breathe
Fire from their nostrils !'

'But they mince up men 1110
With those quick jaws !'

'You talk of provender
For mountain-beasts, and not mere horses' food !'

'Thou mayst behold their mangers caked with gore !'

'And of what sire does he who bred them boast
Himself the son ?'

'Of Ares, king o' the targe—
Thrakian, of gold throughout.'

Another laugh.

'Why, just the labour, just the lot for me
Dost thou describe in what I recognize !
Since hard and harder, high and higher yet,
Truly this lot of mine is like to go
If I must needs join battle with the brood
Of Ares : ay, I fought Lukaon first,

1120

And again, Kuknos : now engage in strife
 This third time, with such horses and such lord.
 But there is nobody shall ever see
 Alkmené's son shrink foemen's hand before ! '

— ' Or ever hear him say ' (the Chorus thought)
 ' That death is terrible ; and help us so
 To chime in—" terrible beyond a doubt,
 And, if to thee, why, to ourselves much more : 1130
 Know what has happened, then, and sympathise " ! '
 Therefore they gladly stopped the dialogue,
 Shifted the burthen to new shoulder straight,
 As, ' Look where comes the lord o' the land, himself,
 Admetos, from the palace ! ' they outbroke
 In some surprise, as well as much relief.
 What had induced the king to waive his right
 And luxury of woe in loneliness ?

Out he came quietly ; the hair was clipt,
 And the garb sable ; else no outward sign 1140
 Of sorrow as he came and faced his friend.
 Was truth fast terrifying tears away ?
 ' Hail, child of Zeus, and sprung from Perseus too ! '
 The salutation ran without a fault.

' And thou, Admetos, King of Thessaly ! '

' Would, as thou wishest me, the grace might fall !
 But my good-wisher, that thou art, I know. '

' What's here ? these shorn locks, this sad show of thee ? '

' I must inter a certain corpse to-day. '

‘ Now, from thy children God avert mischance ! ’ 1150

‘ They live, my children ; all are in the house ! ’

‘ Thy father—if ’tis he departs indeed,
His age was ripe at least.’

‘ My father lives,
And she who bore me lives too, Herakles.’

‘ It cannot be thy wife Alkestis gone ? ’

‘ Two-fold the tale is, I can tell of her.’

‘ Dead dost thou speak of her, or living yet ? ’

‘ She is—and is not : hence the pain to me ! ’

‘ I learn no whit the more, so dark thy speech ! ’

‘ Know’st thou not on what fate she needs must fall ? ’

‘ I know she is resigned to die for thee.’ 1161

‘ How lives she still, then, if submitting so ? ’

‘ Eh, weep her not beforehand ! wait till then ! ’

‘ Who is to die is dead ; doing is done.’

‘ To be and not to be are thought diverse.’

‘ Thou judgest this—I, that way, Herakles ! ’

' Well, but declare what causes thy complaint !
Who is the man has died from out thy friends ? '

' No man : I had a woman in my mind.'

' Alien, or someone born akin to thee ? ' 1170

' Alien : but still related to my house.'

' How did it happen then that here she died ? '

' Her father dying left his orphan here.'

' Alas, Admetos—would we found thee gay,
Not grieving ! '

' What as if about to do
Subjoinest thou that comment ? '

' I shall seek
Another hearth, proceed to other hosts.'

' Never, O king, shall that be ! No such ill
Betide me ! '

' Nay, to mourners should there come
A guest, he proves importunate ! '

' The dead— 1180
Dead are they : but go thou within my house ! '

' 'Tis base carousing beside friends who mourn.'

' The guest-rooms, whither we shall lead thee, lie
Apart from ours.'

‘ Nay, let me go my way !
Ten thousandfold the favour I shall thank ! ’

‘ It may not be thou goest to the hearth
Of any man but me ! ’ so made an end
Admetos, softly and decisively,
Of the altercation. Herakles forbore :
And the king bade a servant lead the way, 1190
Open the guest-rooms ranged remote from view
O’ the main hall ; tell the functionaries, next,
They had to furnish forth a plenteous feast,
And then shut close the doors o’ the hall, midway,
‘ Because it is not proper friends who feast
Should hear a groaning or be grieved,’ quoth he.
Whereat the hero, who was truth itself,
Let out the smile again, repressed awhile
Like fountain-brilliance one forbids to play.
He did too many grandnesses, to note 1200
Much in the meaner things about his path :
And stepping there, with face towards the sun,
Stopped seldom to pluck weeds or ask their names.
Therefore he took Admetos at the word :
This trouble must not hinder any more
A true heart from good will and pleasant ways.
And so, the great arm, which had slain the snake,
Strained his friend’s head a moment in embrace
On that broad breast beneath the lion’s hide,
Till the king’s cheek winced at the thick rough gold ; 1210
And then strode off, with who had care of him,
To the remote guest-chamber : glad to give
Poor flesh and blood their respite and relief
In the interval ’twixt fight and fight again—

All for the world's sake. Our eyes followed him,
Be sure, till those mid-doors shut us outside.
The king, too, watched great Herakles go off
All faith, love, and obedience to a friend.

And when they questioned him, the simple ones,
'What dost thou? Such calamity to face, 1220
Lies full before thee—and thou art so bold
As play the host, Admetos? Hast thy wits?'
He replied calmly to each chiding tongue:
'But if from house and home I forced away
A coming guest, wouldst thou have praised me more?
No, truly! since calamity were mine,
Nowise diminished; while I showed myself
Unhappy and inhospitable too:
So adding to my ills this other ill,
That mine were styled a stranger-hating house. 1230
Myself have ever found this man the best
Of entertainers when I went his way
To parched and thirsty Argos.'

'If so be—

Why didst thou hide what destiny was here,
When one came that was kindly, as thou say'st?'

'He never would have willed to cross my door
Had he known aught of my calamities.
And probably to some of you I seem
Unwise enough in doing what I do;
Such will scarce praise me: but these halls of mine 1240
Know not to drive off and dishonour guests.'

And so, the duty done, he turned once more
To go and busy him about his dead.

As for the sympathisers left to muse,
There was a change, a new light thrown on things,
Contagion from the magnanimity
O' the man whose life lay on his hand so light,
As up he stepped, pursuing duty still
'Higher and harder,' as he laughed and said.
Somehow they found no folly now in the act 1250
They blamed erewhile : Admetos' private grief
Shrank to a somewhat pettier obstacle
I' the way o' the world : they saw good days had been,
And good days, peradventure, still might be,
Now that they overlooked the present cloud
Heavy upon the palace opposite.
And soon the thought took words and music thus.

'Harbour of many a stranger, free to friend,
Ever and always, O thou house o' the man
We mourn for ! Thee, Apollon's very self, 1260
The lyric Puthian, deigned inhabit once,
Become a shepherd here in thy domains,
And pipe, adown the winding hill-side paths,
Pastoral marriage-poems to thy flocks
At feed : while with them fed in fellowship,
Through joy i' the music, spot-skin lynxes ; ay,
And lions too, the bloody company,
Came, leaving Othrus' dell ; and round thy lyre,
Phoibos, there danced the speckle-coated fawn,
Pacing on lightsome fetlock past the pines 1270
Tress-topped, the creature's natural boundary,
Into the open everywhere ; such heart
Had she within her, beating joyous beats,
At the sweet reassurance of thy song !

Therefore the lot o' the master is, to live
 In a home multitudinous with herds,
 Along by the fair-flowing Boibian lake,
 Limited, that ploughed land and pasture-plain,
 Only where stand the sun's steeds, stabled west
 I' the cloud, by that mid-air which makes the clime 1280
 Of those Molossoi : and he rules as well
 O'er the Aigaian, up to Pelion's shore,—
 Sea-stretch without a port ! Such lord have we :
 And here he opens house now, as of old,
 Takes to the heart of it a guest again :
 Though moist the eyelid of the master, still
 Mourning his dear wife's body, dead but now ! '

And they admired : nobility of soul
 Was self-impelled to reverence, they saw :
 The best men ever prove the wisest too : 1290
 Something instinctive guides them still aright.
 And on each soul this boldness settled now,
 That one, who revered the Gods so much,
 Would prosper yet : (or—I could wish it ran—
 Who venerates the Gods, i' the main will still
 Practise things honest though obscure to judge).

They ended, for Admetos entered now ;
 Having disposed all duteously indoors,
 He came into the outside world again,
 Quiet as ever : but a quietude 1300
 Bent on pursuing its descent to truth,
 As who must grope until he gain the ground
 O' the dungeon doomed to be his dwelling now.
 Already high o'er head was piled the dusk,

When something pushed to stay his downward step,
Pluck back despair just reaching its repose.
He would have bidden the kind presence there
Observe that,—since the corpse was coming out,
Cared for in all things that befit the case,
Carried aloft, in decency and state, 1310
To the last burial place and burning pile,—
'Twere proper friends addressed, as custom prompts,
Alkestis bound on her last journeying.

'Ay, for we see thy father,' they subjoined,
'Advancing as the aged foot best may ;
His servants, too : each bringing in his hand
Adornments for thy wife, all pomp that's due
To the downward-dwelling people.' And in truth,
By slow procession till they filled the stage,
Came Pheres, and his following, and their gifts. 1320
You see, the worst of the interruption was,
It plucked back, with an over-hasty hand,
Admetos from descending to the truth,
(I told you)—put him on the brink again,
Full i' the noise and glare where late he stood :
With no fate fallen and irrevocable,
But all things subject still to chance and change :
And that chance—life, and that change—happiness.
And with the low strife came the little mind :
He was once more the man might gain so much, 1330
Life too and wife too, would his friends but help !
All he felt now was that there faced him one
Supposed the likeliest, in emergency,
To help : and help, by mere self-sacrifice
So natural, it seemed as if the sire

Must needs lie open still to argument,
Withdraw the rash decision, not to die
But rather live, though death would save his son :—
Argument like the ignominious grasp
O' the drowner whom his fellow grasps as fierce, 1340
Each marvelling that the other needs must hold
Head out of water, though friend choke thereby.

And first the father's salutation fell.
Burthened, he came, in common with his child,
Who lost, none would gainsay, a good chaste spouse :
Yet such things must be borne, though hard to bear.
' So, take this tribute of adornment, deep
In the earth let it descend along with her !
Behoves we treat the body with respect
—Of one who died, at least, to save thy life, 1350
Kept me from being childless, nor allowed
That I, bereft of thee, should peak and pine
In melancholy age ! she, for the sex,
All of her sisters, put in evidence,
By daring such a feat, that female life
Might prove more excellent than men suppose.
O thou Alkestis ! ' out he burst in fine,
' Who, while thou savedst this my son, didst raise
Also myself from sinking,—hail to thee !
Well be it with thee even in the house 1360
Of Hades ! I maintain, if mortals must
Marry, this sort of marriage is the sole
Permitted those among them who are wise ! '

So his oration ended. Like hates like :
Accordingly Admetos,—full i' the face

Of Pheres, his true father, outward shape
And inward fashion, body matching soul,—
Saw just himself when years should do their work
And reinforce the selfishness inside
Until it pushed the last disguise away : 1370
As when the liquid metal cools i' the mould,
Stands forth a statue : bloodless, hard, cold bronze.
So, in old Pheres, young Admetos showed,
Pushed to completion : and a shudder ran,
And his repugnance soon had vent in speech :
Glad to escape outside, nor, pent within,
Find itself there fit food for exercise.

' Neither to this interment called by me
Comest thou, nor thy presence I account
Among the covetable proofs of love. 1380
As for thy tribute of adornment,—no !
Ne'er shall she don it, ne'er in debt to thee
Be buried ! What is thine, that keep thou still !
Then it behoved thee to commiserate
When I was perishing : but thou—who stood'st
Foot-free o' the snare, wast acquiescent then
That I, the young, should die, not thou, the old—
Wilt thou lament this corpse thyself hast slain ?
'Thou wast not, then, true father to this flesh ;
Nor she, who makes profession of my birth 1390
And styles herself my mother, neither she
Bore me : but, come of slave's blood, I was cast
Stealthily 'neath the bosom of thy wife !
Thou showedst, put to touch, the thing thou art,
Nor I esteem myself born child of thee !
Otherwise, thine is the preëminence

O'er all the world in cowardice of soul :
Who, being the old man thou art, arrived
Where life should end, didst neither will nor dare
Die for thy son, but left the task to her, 1400
The alien woman, whom I well might think
Own, only mother both and father too !
And yet a fair strife had been thine to strive,
—Dying for thy own child ; and brief for thee
In any case, the rest of time to live ;
While I had lived, and she, our rest of time,
Nor I been left to groan in solitude.
Yet certainly all things which happy man
Ought to experience, thy experience grasped.
Thou wast a ruler through the bloom of youth, 1410
And I was son to thee, recipient due
Of sceptre and demesne,—no need to fear
That dying thou shouldst leave an orphan house
For strangers to despoil. Nor yet wilt thou
Allege that as dishonouring, forsooth,
Thy length of days, I gave thee up to die,—
I, who have held thee in such reverence !
And in exchange for it, such gratitude
Thou, father,—thou award'st me, mother mine !
Go, lose no time, then, in begetting sons 1420
Shall cherish thee in age, and, when thou diest,
Deck up and lay thee out as corpses claim !
For never I, at least, with this my hand
Will bury thee : it is myself am dead
So far as lies in thee. But if I light
Upon another saviour, and still see
The sunbeam,—his, the child I call myself,
His, the old age that claims my cherishing.

How vainly do these aged pray for death,
Abuse the slow drag of senility ! 1430
But should death step up, nobody inclines
To die, nor age is now the weight it was ! '

You see what all this poor pretentious talk
Tried at,—how weakness strove to hide itself
In bluster against weakness,—the loud word
To hide the little whisper, not so low
Already in that heart beneath those lips !
Ha, could it be, who hated cowardice
Stood confessed craven, and who lauded so
Self-immolating love, himself had pushed 1440
The loved one to the altar in his place ?
Friends interposed, would fain stop further play
O' the sharp-edged tongue : they felt love's champion
here
Had left an undefended point or two,
The antagonist might profit by ; bade ' Pause !
Enough the present sorrow ! Nor, O son,
Whet thus against thyself thy father's soul ! '

Ay, but old Pheres was the stouter stuff !
Admetos, at the flintiest of the heart,
Had so much soft in him as held a fire : 1450
The other was all iron, clashed from flint
Its fire, but shed no spark and showed no bruise.
Did Pheres crave instruction as to facts ?
He came, content, the ignoble word, for him,
Should lurk still in the blackness of each breast,
As sleeps the water-serpent half surmised :
Not brought up to the surface at a bound,

By one touch of the idly-probing spear,
Reed-like against unconquerable scale.
He came pacific, rather, as strength should, 1460
Bringing the decent praise, the due regret,
And each banality prescribed of old.
Did he commence 'Why let her die for you?'
And rouse the coiled and quiet ugliness
'What is so good to man as man's own life?'
No: but the other did: and, for his pains,
Out, full in face of him, the venom leapt.

'And whom dost thou make bold, son—Ludian slave,
Or Phrugian whether, money made thy ware,
To drive at with revilings? Know'st thou not 1470
I, a Thessalian, from Thessalian sire
Spring and am born legitimately free?
Too arrogant art thou, and, youngster words
Casting against me, having had thy fling,
Thou goest not off as all were ended so!
I gave thee birth indeed and mastership
I' the mansion, brought thee up to boot: there ends
My owning, nor extends to die for thee!
Never did I receive it as a law
Hereditary, no, nor Greek at all, 1480
That sires in place of sons were bound to die.
For, to thy sole and single self wast thou
Born, with whatever fortune, good or bad;
Such things as bear bestowment, those thou hast;
Already ruling widely, broad-lands, too,
Doubt not but I shall leave thee in due time:
For why? My father left me them before.
Well then, where wrong I thee?—of what defraud?

Neither do thou die for this man, myself,
Nor let him die for thee !—is all I beg. 1490
Thou joyest seeing daylight : dost suppose
Thy father joys not too ? Undoubtedly,
Long I account the time to pass below,
And brief my span of days ; yet sweet the same :
Is it otherwise to thee who, impudent,
Didst fight off this same death, and livest now
Through having sneaked past fate apportioned thee,
And slain thy wife so ? Cryest cowardice
On me, I wonder, thou—whom, poor poltroon,
A very woman worsted, daring death 1500
Just for the sake of thee, her handsome spark ?
Shrewdly hast thou contrived how not to die
For evermore now : 'tis but still persuade
The wife, for the time being, to take thy place !
What, and thy friends who would not do the like,
These dost thou carp at, craven thus thyself ?
Crouch and be silent, craven ! Comprehend
That, if thou lovest so that life of thine,
Why, everybody loves his own life too :
So, good words, henceforth ! If thou speak us ill, 1510
Many and true an ill thing shalt thou hear ! '

There you saw leap the hydra at full length !
Only, the old kept glorying the more,
The more the portent thus uncoiled itself,
Whereas the young man shuddered head to foot,
And shrank from kinship with the creature. Why
Such horror, unless what he hated most,
Vaunting itself outside, might fairly claim
Acquaintance with the counterpart at home ?

I would the Chorus here had plucked up heart, 1520
 Spoken out boldly and explained the man,
 If not to men, to Gods. That way, I think,
 Sophokles would have led their dance and song.
 Here, they said simply ' Too much evil spoke
 On both sides ! ' As the young before, so now
 They bade the old man leave abusing thus.

' Let him speak,—I have spoken ! ' said the youth :
 And so died out the wrangle by degrees
 In wretched bickering. ' If thou wince at fact,
 Behoved thee not prove faulty to myself ! ' 1530

' Had I died for thee I had faulted more ! '

' All's one, then, for youth's bloom and age to die ? '

' Our duty is to live one life, not two ! '

' Go then, and outlive Zeus, for aught I care ! '

' What, curse thy parents with no sort of cause ? '

' Curse, truly ! All thou lovest is long life ! '

' And dost not thou, too, all for love of life,
 Carry out now, in place of thine, this corpse ? '

' Monument, rather, of thy cowardice,
 Thou worst one ! '

' Not for me she died, I hope ! 1540
 That, thou wilt hardly say ! '

' No, simply this :
 Would, some day, thou mayst come to need myself ! '

‘ Meanwhile, woo many wives—the more will die ! ’

‘ And so shame thee who never dared the like ! ’

‘ Dear is this light o’ the sun-god—dear, I say ! ’

‘ Proper conclusion for a beast to draw ! ’

‘ One thing is certain : there’s no laughing now,
As out thou bearest the poor dead old man ! ’

‘Die when thou wilt, thou wilt die infamous!’

' And once dead, whether famed or infamous, 1550
I shall not care ! '

‘ Alas and yet again !
How full is age of impudency ! ’

‘ True !

Thou couldst not call thy young wife impudent :
She was found foolish merely.'

‘ Get thee gone !
And let me bury this my dead ! ’

‘ I go.
Thou buriest her whom thou didst murder first ;
Whereof there’s some account to render yet
Those kinsfolk by the marriage-side ! I think,
Brother Akastos may be classed with me,
Among the beasts, not men, if he omit
Avenging upon thee his sister’s blood ! ’

‘Go to perdition, with thy housemate too!
Grow old all childlessly, with child alive,

Just as ye merit ! for to me, at least,
 Beneath the same roof ne'er do ye return.
 And did I need by heralds' help renounce
 The ancestral hearth, I had renounced the same !
 But we—since this woe, lying at our feet
 I' the path, is to be borne—let us proceed
 And lay the body on the pyre.'

I think,

1570

What, thro' this wretched wrangle, kept the man
 From seeing clear—beside the cause I gave—
 Was, that the woe, himself described as full
 I' the path before him, there did really lie—
 Not roll into the abyss of dead and gone.
 How, with Alkestis present, calmly crowned,
 Was she so irrecoverable yet—
 The bird, escaped, that's just on bough above,
 The flower, let flutter half-way down the brink ?
 Not so detached seemed lifelessness from life
 But—one dear stretch beyond all straining yet—
 And he might have her at his heart once more,
 When, in the critical minute, up there comes
 The father and the fact, to trifle time !

1580

'To the pyre !' an instinct prompted : pallid face,
 And passive arm and pointed foot, when these
 No longer shall absorb the sight, O friends,
 Admetos will begin to see indeed
 Who the true foe was, where the blows should fall !

So, the old selfish Pheres went his way,
 Case-hardened as he came ; and left the youth,
 (Only half-selfish now, since sensitive)

1590

To go on learning by a light the more,
As friends moved off, renewing dirge the while :

‘ Unhappy in thy daring ! Noble dame,
Best of the good, farewell ! With favouring face
May Hermes the infernal, Hades too,
Receive thee ! And if there,—ay, there,—some touch
Of further dignity await the good,
Sharing with them, mayst thou sit throned by her 1600
The Bride of Hades, in companionship ! ’

Wherewith the sad procession wound away,
Made slowly for the suburb sepulchre.
And lo,—while still one's heart, in time and tune,
Paced after that symmetric step of Death
Mute-marching, to the mind's eye, at the head
O' the mourners—one hand pointing out their path
With the long pale terrific sword we saw,
The other leading, with grim tender grace,
Alkestis quieted and consecrate,— 1610
Lo, life again knocked laughing at the door !
The world goes on, goes ever, in and through,
And out again o' the cloud. We faced about,
Fronted the palace where the mid-hall-gate
Opened—not half, nor half of half, perhaps—
Yet wide enough to let out light and life,
And warmth and bounty and hope and joy, at once.
Festivity burst wide, fruit rare and ripe
Crushed in the mouth of Bacchos, pulpy-prime,
All juice and flavour, save one single seed 1620
Duly ejected from the God's nice lip,
Which lay o' the red edge, blackly visible—

To wit, a certain ancient servitor :
On whom the festal jaws o' the palace shut,
So, there he stood, a much-bewildered man.
Stupid ? Nay, but sagacious in a sort :
Learned, life long, i' the first outside of things,
Though bat for blindness to what lies beneath
And needs a nail-scratch ere 'tis laid you bare.
This functionary was the trusted one 1630
We saw deputed by Admetos late
To lead in Herakles and help him, soul
And body, to such snatched repose, snapped-up
Sustainment, as might do away the dust
O' the last encounter, knit each nerve anew
For that next onset sure to come at cry
O' the creature next assailed,—nay, should it prove
Only the creature that came forward now
To play the critic upon Herakles !

' Many the guests '—so he soliloquized 1640
In musings burdensome to breast before,
When it seemed not too prudent tongue should wag—
' Many, and from all quarters of this world,
The guests I now have known frequent our house,
For whom I spread the banquet ; but than this,
Never a worse one did I yet receive
At the hearth here ! One who seeing, first of all,
The master's sorrow, entered gate the same,
And had the hardihood to house himself.
Did things stop there ! But, modest by no means, 1650
He took what entertainment lay to hand,
Knowing of our misfortune,—did we fail
In aught of the fit service, urged us serve

Just as a guest expects ! And in his hands
Taking the ivied goblet, drinks and drinks
The unmixed product of black mother-earth,
Until the blaze o' the wine went round about
And warmed him : then he crowns with myrtle sprigs
His head, and howls discordance—twofold lay
Was thereupon for us to listen to— 1660
This fellow singing, namely, nor restrained
A jot by sympathy with sorrows here—
While we o' the household mourned our mistress--
 mourned,
That is to say, in silence—never showed
The eyes, which we kept wetting, to the guest—
For there Admetos was imperative.
And so, here am I helping make at home
A guest, some fellow ripe for wickedness,
Robber or pirate, while she goes her way
Out of our house : and neither was it mine 1670
To follow in procession, nor stretch forth
Hand, wave my lady dear a last farewell,
Lamenting who to me and all of us
Domestics was a mother : myriad harms
She used to ward away from everyone,
And mollify her husband's ireful mood.
I ask then, do I justly hate or no
This guest, this interloper on our grief ? '

' Hate him and justly ! ' Here's the proper judge
Of what is due to the house from Herakles ! 1680
This man of much experience saw the first
O' the feeble duckings-down at destiny,
When King Admetos went his rounds, poor soul,

A-begging somebody to be so brave
As die for one afraid to die himself—
'Thou, friend? Thou, love? Father or mother, then!
None of you? What, Alkestis must Death catch?
O best of wives, one woman in the world!
But nowise droop: our prayers may still assist:
Let us try sacrifice; if those avail 1690
Nothing and Gods avert their countenance,
Why, deep and durable our grief will be!
Whereat the house, this worthy at its head,
Re-echoed 'deep and durable our grief!'
This sage, who justly hated Herakles,
Did he suggest once 'Rather I than she!'
Admonish the Turannos—'Be a man!
Bear thine own burden, never think to thrust
Thy fate upon another and thy wife!
It were a dubious gain could death be doomed 1700
That other, and no passionatest plea
Of thine, to die instead, have force with fate;
Seeing thou lov'st Alkestis: what were life
Unlighted by the loved one? But to live—
Not merely live unsolaced by some thought,
Some word so poor—yet solace all the same—
As "Thou i' the sepulchre, Alkestis, say!
Would I, or would not I, to save thy life,
Die, and die on, and die for evermore?"
No! but to read red-written up and down 1710
The world "This is the sunshine, this the shade,
This is some pleasure of earth, sky or sea,
Due to that other, dead that thou mayst live!"
Such were a covetable gain to thee?
Go die, fool, and be happy while 'tis time!'

One word of counsel in this kind, methinks,
 Had fallen to better purpose than Ai, ai,
 Pheu, pheu, e, papai, and a pother of praise
 O' the best, best, best one ! Nothing was to hate
 In King Admetos, Pheres, and the rest 1720
 O' the household down to his heroic self !

This was the one thing hateful : Herakles
 Had flung into the presence, frank and free,
 Out from the labour into the repose,
 Ere out again and over head and ears
 I' the heart of labour, all for love of men :
 Making the most o' the minute, that the soul
 And body, strained to height a minute since,
 Might lie relaxed in joy, this breathing-space,
 For man's sake more than ever ; till the bow, 1730
 Restrung o' the sudden, at first cry for help,
 Should send some unimaginable shaft
 True to the aim and shatteringly through
 The plate-mail of a monster, save man so.
 He slew the pest o' the marish yesterday :
 To-morrow he would bit the flame-breathed stud
 That fed on man's flesh : and this day between—
 Because he held it natural to die,
 And fruitless to lament a thing past cure,
 So, took his fill of food, wine, song and flowers, 1740
 Till the new labour claimed him soon enough,—
 ' Hate him and justly ! '

True, Charopé mine !

The man surmised not Herakles lay hid
 I' the guest ; or, knowing it, was ignorant
 That still his lady lived—for Herakles ;
 Or else judged lightness needs must indicate

This or the other cañtiff quality :
 And therefore—had been right if not so wrong !
 For who expects the sort of him will scratch
 A nail's depth, scrape the surface just to see 1750
 What peradventure underlies the same ?

So, he stood petting up his puny hate,
 Parent-wise, proud of the ill-favoured babe.
 Not long ! A great hand, careful lest it crush,
 Startled him on the shoulder : up he stared,
 And over him, who stood but Herakles !
 There smiled the mighty presence, all one smile
 And no touch more of the world-weary God,
 Through the brief respite. Just a garland's grace
 About the brow, a song to satisfy 1760
 Head, heart and breast, and trumpet-lips at once,
 A solemn draught of true religious wine,
 And,—how should I know ?—half a mountain goat
 Torn up and swallowed down,—the feast was fierce
 But brief : all cares and pains took wing and flew,
 Leaving the hero ready to begin
 And help mankind, whatever woe came next,
 Even though what came next should be nought more
 Than the mean querulous mouth o' the man, remarked
 Pursing its grievance up till patience failed 1770
 And the sage needs must rush out, as we saw
 To sulk outside and pet his hate in peace.
 By no means would the Helper have it so :
 He who was just about to handle brutes
 In Thrace, and bit the jaws which breathed the flame,—
 Well, if a good laugh and a jovial word
 Could bridle age which blew bad humours forth,

That were a kind of help, too !

‘ Thou, there ! ’ hailed

This grand benevolence the ungracious one—

‘ Why look’st so solemn and so thought-absorbed ? 1780

To guests a servant should not sour-faced be,

But do the honours with a mind urbane.

While thou, contrariwise, beholding here

Arrive thy master’s comrade, hast for him

A churlish visage, all one beetle-brow—

Having regard to grief that’s out-of-door !

Come hither, and so get to grow more wise !

Things mortal—know’st the nature that they have ?

No, I imagine ! whence could knowledge spring ?

Give ear to me, then ! For all flesh to die, 1790

Is nature’s due ; nor is there any one

Of mortals with assurance he shall last

The coming morrow : for, what’s born of chance

Invisibly proceeds the way it will,

Not to be learned, no fortune-teller’s prize.

This, therefore, having heard and known through me,

Gladden thyself ! Drink ! Count the day-by-day

Existence thine, and all the other—chance !

Ay, and pay homage also to by far

The sweetest of divinities for man, 1800

Kupris ! Benignant Goddess will she prove !

But as for aught else, leave and let things be !

And trust my counsel, if I seem to speak

To purpose—as I do, apparently.

Wilt not thou, then,—discarding overmuch

Mournfulness, do away with this shut door,

Come drink along with me, be-garlanded

This fashion ? Do so, and—I well know what—

From this stern mood, this shrunk-up state of mind,
The pit-pat fall o' the flagon-juice down throat 1810
Soon will dislodge thee from bad harbourage !
Men being mortal should think mortal-like :
Since to your solemn, brow-contracting sort,
All of them,—so I lay down law at least,—
Life is not truly life but misery.'

Where to the man with softened surliness :
' We know as much : but deal with matters, now,
Hardly befitting mirth and revelry.'

' No intimate, this woman that is dead :
Mourn not too much ! For, those o' the house itself, 1820
Thy masters live, remember ! '

' Live indeed ?

Ah, thou know'st nought o' the woe within these walls ! '

' I do—unless thy master spoke me false
Somehow ! '

' Ay, ay, too much he loves a guest,
Too much, that master mine ! ' so muttered he.

' Was it improper he should treat me well,
Because an alien corpse was in the way ? '

' No alien, but most intimate indeed ! '

' Can it be, some woe was, he told me not ? '

' Farewell and go thy way ! Thy cares for thee— 1830
To us, our master's sorrow is a care.'

'This word begins no tale of alien woe !'

'Had it been other woe than intimate,
I could have seen thee feast, nor felt amiss.'

'What ! have I suffered strangely from my host ?'

'Thou cam'st not at a fit reception-time :
With sorrow here beforehand : and thou seest
Shorn hair, black robes.'

'But who is it that's dead ?
Some child gone ? or the aged sire perhaps ?'

'Admetos' wife, then ! she has perished, guest ! 1840

'How sayest ? And did ye house me, all the same ?

'Ay : for he had thee in that reverence
He dared not turn thee from his door away !'

'O hapless, and bereft of what a mate !'

'All of us now are dead, not she alone !'

'But I divined it ! seeing, as I did,
His eye that ran with tears, his close-clipt hair,
His countenance ! Though he persuaded me,
Saying it was a stranger's funeral
He went with to the grave : against my wish, 1850
He forced on me that I should enter doors,
Drink in the hall o' the hospitable man
Circumstanced so ! And do I revel yet
With wreath on head ? But—thou to hold thy peace

‘ By the road that leads
Straight to Larissa, thou wilt see the tomb,
Out of the suburb, a carved sepulchre.’

Not long quenched ! As the flame, just hurried off
The brand's edge, suddenly renews its bite,
Tasting some richness caked i' the core o' the tree,—
Pine, with a blood that's oil,—and triumphs up
Pillar-wise to the sky and saves the world :
So, in a spasm and splendour of resolve,
All at once did the God surmount the man. 1880

‘ O much-enduring heart and hand of mine !
Now show what sort of son she bore to Zeus,

That daughter of Elektruon, Tiruns' child,
Alkmené ! for that son must needs save now
The just-dead lady : ay, establish here
I' the house again Alkestis, bring about
Comfort and succour to Admetos so !
I will go lie in wait for Death, black-stoled
King of the corpses ! I shall find him, sure,
Drinking, beside the tomb, o' the sacrifice : 1890
And if I lie in ambuscade, and leap
Out of my lair, and seize—encircle him
Till one hand join the other round about—
There lives not who shall pull him out from me,
Rib-mauled, before he let the woman go !
But even say I miss the booty,—say,
Death comes not to the boltered blood,—why then,
Down go I, to the unsunned dwelling-place
Of Koré and the king there,—make demand,
Confident I shall bring Alkestis back, 1900
So as to put her in the hands of him
My host, that housed me, never drove me off :
Though stricken with sore sorrow, hid the stroke,
Being a noble heart and honouring me !
Who of Thessalians, more than this man, loves
The stranger ? Who, that now inhabits Greece ?
Wherefore he shall not say the man was vile
Whom he befriended,—native noble heart !'

So, one look upward, as if Zeus might laugh
Approval of his human progeny,— 1910
One summons of the whole magnific frame,
Each sinew to its service,—up he caught,
And over shoulder cast, the lion-shag,

Let the club go,—for had he not those hands ?
And so went striding off, on that straight way
Leads to Larissa and the suburb tomb.
Gladness be with thee, Helper of our world !
I think this is the authentic sign and seal
Of Godship, that it ever waxes glad,
And more glad, until gladness blossoms, bursts 1920
Into a rage to suffer for mankind,
And recommence at sorrow : drops like seed
After the blossom, ultimate of all.
Say, does the seed scorn earth and seek the sun ?
Surely it has no other end and aim
Than to drop, once more die into the ground,
Taste cold and darkness and oblivion there :
And thence rise, tree-like grow through pain to joy,
More joy and most joy,—do man good again.

So, to the struggle off strode Herakles. 1930
When silence closed behind the lion-garb,
Back came our dull fact settling in its place,
Though heartiness and passion half-dispersed
The inevitable fate. And presently
In came the mourners from the funeral,
One after one, until we hoped the last
Would be Alkestis and so end our dream.
Could they have really left Alkestis lone
I' the wayside sepulchre ! Home, all save she !
And when Admetos felt that it was so, 1940
By the stand-still : when he lifted head and face
From the two hiding hands and peplos' fold,
And looked forth, knew the palace, knew the hills,
Knew the plains, knew the friendly frequency there,

And no Alkestis any more again,
Why, the whole woe billow-like broke on him.

'O hateful entry, hateful countenance
O' the widowed halls ! '—he moaned. 'What was to be ?
Go there ? Stay here ? Speak, not speak ? All was
now

Mad and impossible alike ; one way 1950
And only one was sane and safe—to die :
Now he was made aware how dear is death,
How loveable the dead are, how the heart
Yearns in us to go hide where they repose,
When we find sunbeams do no good to see,
Nor earth rests rightly where our footsteps fall.
His wife had been to him the very pledge,
Sun should be sun, earth—earth ; the pledge was robbed,
Pact broken, and the world was left no world.'
He stared at the impossible mad life : 1960
Stood, while they urged 'Advance—advance ! Go deep
Into the utter dark, thy palace-core !'
They tried what they called comfort, 'touched the quick
Of the ulceration in his soul,' he said,
With memories,—'once thy joy was thus and thus !
True comfort were to let him fling himself
Into the hollow grave o' the tomb, and so
Let him lie dead along with all he loved.

One bade him note that his own family
Boasted a certain father whose sole son, 1970
Worthy bewailment, died : and yet the sire
Bore stoutly up against the blow and lived ;
For all that he was childless now, and prone

Already to grey hairs, far on in life.
 Could such a good example miss effect ?
 Why fix foot, stand so, staring at the house,
 Why not go in, as that wise kinsman would ?

' O that arrangement of the house I know !
 How can I enter, how inhabit thee
 Now that one cast of fortune changes all ? 1980
 Oh me, for much divides the then from now !
 Then—with those pine-tree torches, Pelian pomp
 And marriage-hymns, I entered, holding high
 The hand of my dear wife ; while many-voiced
 The revelry that followed me and her
 That's dead now,—friends felicitating both,
 As who were lofty-lineaged, each of us
 Born of the best, two wedded and made one ;
 Now—wail is wedding-chant's antagonist,
 And, for white peplos, stoles in sable state 1990
 Herald my way to the deserted couch ! '

The one word more they ventured was ' This grief
 Befell thee witless of what sorrow means,
 Close after prosperous fortune : but, reflect !
 Thou hast saved soul and body. Dead, thy wife—
 Living, the love she left. What's novel here ?
 Many the man, from whom Death long ago
 Loosed the life-partner ! '

Then Admetos spoke :
 Turned on the comfort, with no tears, this time.
 He was beginning to be like his wife. 2000
 I told you of that pressure to the point,
 Word slow pursuing word in monotone,

Alkestis spoke with ; so Admetos, now,
 Solemnly bore the burden of the truth.
 And as the voice of him grew, gathered strength,
 And groaned on, and persisted to the end,
 We felt how deep had been descent in grief,
 And with what change he came up now to light,
 And left behind such littleness as tears.

' Friends, I account the fortune of my wife 2010
 Happier than mine, though it seem otherwise :
 For, her indeed no grief will ever touch,
 And she from many a labour pauses now,
 Renowned one ! Whereas I, who ought not live,
 But do live, by evading destiny,
 Sad life am I to lead, I learn at last !
 For how shall I bear going in-doors here ?
 Accosting whom ? By whom saluted back,
 Shall I have joyous entry ? Whither turn ?
 Inside, the solitude will drive me forth, 2020
 When I behold the empty bed—my wife's—
 The seat she used to sit upon, the floor
 Unsprinkled as when dwellers loved the cool,
 The children that will clasp my knees about,
 Cry for their mother back : these servants too
 Moaning for what a guardian they have lost !
 Inside my house such circumstance awaits.
 Outside,—Thessalian people's marriage-feasts
 And gatherings for talk will harass me,
 With overflow of women everywhere ; 2030
 It is impossible I look on them—
 Familiars of my wife and just her age !
 And then, whoever is a foe of mine,

Which Thrakian tablets treasure, Orphic voice
Wrote itself down upon : nor remedy
Which Phoibos gave to the Asklepiadai ;
Cutting the roots of many a virtuous herb
To solace overburdened mortals. None !
Of this sole goddess, never may we go
To altar nor to image : sacrifice 2070
She hears not. All to pray for is—" Approach !
But, oh, no harder on me, awful one,
Than heretofore ! Let life endure thee still !
For, whatsoe'er Zeus' nod decree, that same
In concert with thee hath accomplishment.
Iron, the very stuff o' the Chaluboi,
Thou, by sheer strength, dost conquer and subdue ;
Nor, of that harsh, abrupt resolve of thine,
Any relenting is there ! "

‘ O my king !

Thee also, in the shackles of those hands, 2080
Not to be shunned, the Goddess grasped ! Yet, bear !
Since never wilt thou lead from underground
The dead ones, wail thy worst ! If mortals die,—
The very children of immortals, too,
Dropped 'mid our darkness, these decay as sure !
Dear indeed was she while among us : dear,
Now she is dead, must she for ever be :
Thy portion was to clasp, within thy couch,
The noblest of all women as a wife.
Nor be the tomb of her supposed some heap 2090
That hides mortality : but like the Gods
Honoured, a veneration to a world
Of wanderers ! Oft the wanderer, struck thereby,
Who else had sailed past in his merchant-ship,

Ay, he shall leave ship, land, long wind his way
Up to the mountain-summit, till there break
Speech forth " So, this was she, then, died of old
To save her husband ! now, a deity
She bends above us. Hail, benignant one !
Give good ! " Such voices so will supplicate. 2100

' But—can it be ? Alkmené's offspring comes,
Admetos !—to thy house advances here ! '

I doubt not, they supposed him decently
Dead somewhere in that winter world of Thrace—
Vanquished by one o' the Bistones, or else
Victim to some mad steed's voracity—
For did not friends prognosticate as much ?
It were a new example to the point,
That ' children of immortals, dropped by stealth
Into our darkness, die as sure as we ! ' 2110
A case to quote and comfort people with :
But, as for lamentation, ai and pheu,
Right-minded subjects kept them for their lord.

Ay, he it was advancing ! In he strode,
And took his stand before Admetos,—turned
Now by despair to such a quietude,
He neither raised his face nor spoke, this time,
The while his friend surveyed him steadily.
That friend looked rough with fighting : had he strained
Worst brute to breast was ever strangled yet ? 2120
Somehow, a victory—for there stood the strength,
Happy, as always ; something grave, perhaps ;
The great vein-cordage on the fret-worked front,

Black-swollen, beaded yet with battle-dew
The yellow hair o' the hero !—his big frame
A-quiver with each muscle sinking back
Into the sleepy smooth it leaped from late.
Under the great guard of one arm, there leant
A shrouded something, live and woman-like,
Propped by the heart-beats 'neath the lion-coat. 2130
When he had finished his survey, it seemed,
The heavings of the heart began subside,
The helpful breath returned, and last the smile
Shone out, all Herakles was back again,
As the words followed the saluting hand.

' To friendly man, behoves we freely speak,
Admetos !—nor keep buried, deep in breast,
Blame we leave silent. I assuredly
Judged myself proper, if I should approach
By accident calamities of thine, 2140
To be demonstrably thy friend : but thou
Told'st me not of the corpse then claiming care,
That was thy wife's, but didst instal me guest
I' the house here, as though busied with a grief
Indeed, but then, mere grief beyond thy gate :
And so, I crowned my head, and to the Gods
Poured my libations in thy dwelling-place,
With such misfortune round me. And I blame—
Certainly blame thee, having suffered thus !
But still I would not pain thee, pained enough : 2150
So let it pass ! Wherefore I seek thee now,
Having turned back again though onward bound,
That I will tell thee. Take and keep for me
This woman, till I come thy way again,

Driving before me, having killed the king
O' the Bistones, that drove of Thrakian steeds :
In such case, give the woman back to me !
But should I fare,—as fare I fain would not,
Seeing I hope to prosper and return,—
Then, I bequeath her as thy household slave. 2160
She came into my hands with good hard toil !
For, what find I, when started on my course,
But certain people, a whole country-side,
Holding a wrestling-bout ? as good to me
As a new labour : whence I took, and here
Come keeping with me, this, the victor's prize.
For, such as conquered in the easy work,
Gained horses which they drove away : and such
As conquered in the harder,—those who boxed
And wrestled,—cattle ; and, to crown the prize, 2170
A woman followed. Chancing as I did,
Base were it to forgo this fame and gain !
Well, as I said, I trust her to thy care :
No woman I have kidnapped, understand !
But good hard toil has done it : here I come !
Some day, who knows ? even thou wilt praise the
feat !'

Admetos raised his face and eyed the pair :
Then, hollowly and with submission spoke,
And spoke again, and spoke time after time,
When he perceived the silence of his friend 2180
Would not be broken by consenting word.
As a tired slave goes adding stone to stone
Until he stop some current that molests,
So poor Admetos piled up argument

Vainly against the purpose all too plain
In that great brow acquainted with command.

‘ Nowise dishonouring, nor amid my foes
Ranking thee, did I hide my wife’s ill fate ;
But it were grief superimposed on grief,
Shouldst thou have hastened to another home. 2190
My own woe was enough for me to weep !
But, for this woman,—if it so may be,—
Bid some Thessalian,—I entreat thee, king,—
Keep her,—who has not suffered like myself !
Many of the Pheraioi welcome thee.
Be no reminder to me of my ills !
I could not, if I saw her come to live,
Restrain the tear ! Inflict on me diseased
No new disease : woe bends me down enough !
Then, where could she be sheltered in my house, 2200
Female and young too ? For that she is young,
The vesture and adornment prove. Reflect !
Should such an one inhabit the same roof
With men ? And how, mixed up, a girl, with youths,
Shall she keep pure, in that case ? No light task
To curb the May-day youngster, Herakles !
I only speak because of care for thee.
Or must I, in avoidance of such harm,
Make her to enter, lead her life within
The chamber of the dead one, all apart ? 2210
How shall I introduce this other, couch
This where Alkestis lay ? A double blame
I apprehend : first, from the citizens—
Lest some tongue of them taunt that I betray
My benefactress, fall into the snare

Of a new fresh face : then, the dead one's self,—
Will she not blame me likewise ? Worthy, sure,
Of worship from me ! circumspect my ways,
And jealous of a fault, are bound to be.
But thou,—O woman, whosoe'er thou art,— 2220
Know, thou hast all the form, art like as like
Alkestis, in the bodily shape ! Ah me !
Take,—by the Gods,—this woman from my sight,
Lest thou undo me, the undone before !
Since I seem—seeing her—as if I saw
My own wife ! And confusions cloud my heart,
And from my eyes the springs break forth ! Ah me
Unhappy—how I taste for the first time
My misery in all its bitterness ! '

Whereat the friends conferred : ' The chance, in truth,
Was an untoward one—none said otherwise. 2231
Still, what a God comes giving, good or bad,
That, one should take and bear with. Take her, then ! '

Herakles,—not unfastening his hold
On that same misery, beyond mistake
Hoarse in the words, convulsive in the face,—
' I would that I had such a power ' said he,
' As to lead up into the light again
Thy very wife, and grant thee such a grace.'

' Well do I know thou wouldst : but where the hope ?
There is no bringing back the dead to light.' 2241

' Be not extravagant in grief, no less !
Bear it, by augury of better things ! '

' 'Tis easier to advise "bear up," than bear ! '

' But how carve way i' the life that lies before,
If bent on groaning ever for the past ? '

' I myself know that : but a certain love
Allures me to the choice I shall not change.'

' Ay, but, still loving dead ones, still makes weep.'

' And let it be so ! She has ruined me, 2250
And still more than I say : that answers all.'

' Oh, thou hast lost a brave wife : who disputes ? '

' So brave a one—that he whom thou behold'st
Will never more enjoy his life again ! '

' Time will assuage ! The evil yet is young ! '

' Time, thou mayst say, will ; if time mean—to die.'

' A wife—the longing for new marriage joys
Will stop thy sorrow ! '

' Hush, friend,—hold thy peace !
What hast thou said ! I could not credit ear ! '

' How then ? Thou wilt not marry, then, but keep 2260
A widowed couch ? '

' There is not anyone
Of womankind shall couch with whom thou seest ! '

' Dost think to profit thus in any way
The dead one ? '

' Her, wherever she abide,
My duty is to honour.'

‘ And I praise—
Indeed I praise thee ! Still, thou hast to pay
The price of it, in being held a fool ! ’

‘ Fool call me—only one name call me not !
Bridegroom ! ’

‘ No : it was praise, I portioned thee,
Of being good true husband to thy wife ! ’ 2270

‘ When I betray her, though she is no more,
May I die ! ’

And the thing he said was true :
For out of Herakles a great glow broke.
There stood a victor worthy of a prize :
The violet-crown that withers on the brow
Of the half-hearted claimant. Oh, he knew
The signs of battle hard fought and well won,
This queller of the monsters !—knew his friend
Planted firm foot, now, on the loathly thing
That was Admetos late ! ‘ would die,’ he knew, 2280
Ere let the reptile raise its crest again.
If that was truth, why try the true friend more ?

‘ Then, since thou canst be faithful to the death,
Take, deep into thy house, my dame ! ’ smiled he.

‘ Not so !—I pray, by thy Progenitor ! ’

‘ Thou wilt mistake in disobeying me.’

‘ Obeying thee, I have to break my heart ! ’

‘ Obey me ! Who knows but the favour done
May fall into its place as duty too ? ’

So, he was humble, would decline no more 2290
Bearing a burden : he just sighed ‘ Alas !
Would thou hadst never brought this prize from game ! ’

‘ Yet, when I conquered there, thou conqueredst ! ’

‘ All excellently urged ! Yet—spite of all,
Bear with me ! let the woman go away ! ’

‘ She shall go, if needs must : but ere she go,
See if there *is* need ! ’

‘Need there is! At least,
Except I make thee angry with me, so!’

‘ But I persist, because I have my spice
Of intuition likewise : take the dame ! ’ 2300

‘ Be thou the victor, then ! But certainly
Thou dost thy friend no pleasure in the act ! ’

'Oh, time will come when thou shalt praise me! Now—
Only obey!'

‘ Then, servants, since my house
Must needs receive this woman, take her there ! ’

‘I shall not trust this woman to the care
Of servants.’

‘ Why, conduct her in, thyself,
If that seem preferable ! ’

‘ I prefer,
With thy good leave, to place her in thy hands ! ’

'I would not touch her! Entry to the house— 2310
That, I concede thee.'

‘ To thy sole right hand,
I mean to trust her ! ’

‘ King ! Thou wrenchest this
Out of me by main force, if I submit ! ’

‘ Courage, friend ! Come, stretch hand forth ! Good !
Now touch
The stranger-woman ! ’

‘ There ! A hand I stretch—
As though it meant to cut off Gorgon’s head ! ’

‘ Hast hold of her ? ’

‘ Fast hold.’

‘ Why, then, hold fast
And have her ! and, one day, asseverate
Thou wilt, I think, thy friend, the son of Zeus,
He was the gentle guest to entertain ! 2320
Look at her ! See if she, in any way,
Present thee with resemblance of thy wife ! ’

Ah, but the tears come, find the words at fault !
There is no telling how the hero twitched
The veil off : and there stood, with such fixed eyes
And such slow smile, Alkestis’ silent self !
It was the crowning grace of that great heart,
To keep back joy : procrastinate the truth
Until the wife, who had made proof and found
The husband wanting, might essay once more, 2330
Hear, see, and feel him renovated now—
Able to do, now, all herself had done,
Risen to the height of her : so, hand in hand,
The two might go together, live and die.

Beside, when he found speech, you guess the speech.
He could not think he saw his wife again :
It was some mocking God that used the bliss
To make him mad ! Till Herakles must help :
Assure him that no spectre mocked at all ;
He was embracing whom he buried once. 2340
Still,—did he touch, might he address the true,—
True eye, true body of the true live wife ?

And Herakles said, smiling, ' All was truth.
Spectre ? Admetos had not made his guest
One who played ghost-invoker, or such cheat !
Oh, he might speak and have response, in time !
All heart could wish was gained now—life for death :
Only, the rapture must not grow immense :
Take care, nor wake the envy of the Gods ! '

' Oh thou, of greatest Zeus true son,'—so spoke 2350
Admetos when the closing word must come,
' Go ever in a glory of success,
And save, that sire, his offspring to the end !
For thou hast—only thou—raised me and mine
Up again to this light and life ! ' Then asked
Tremblingly, how was trod the perilous path
Out of the dark into the light and life :
How it had happened with Alkestis there.

And Herakles said little, but enough—
How he engaged in combat with that king 2360
O' the dæmons : how the field of contest lay
By the tomb's self : how he sprang from ambushade,
Captured Death, caught him in that pair of hands.

'Manifold are thy shapings, Providence !
 Many a hopeless matter Gods arrange.
 What we expected never came to pass :
 What we did not expect, Gods brought to bear ;
 So have things gone, this whole experience through !'

Ah, but if you had seen the play itself !
 They say, my poet failed to get the prize :
 Sophokles got the prize,—great name ! They say,
 Sophokles also means to make a piece, 2400
 Model a new Admetos, a new wife :
 Success to him ! One thing has many sides.
 The great name ! But no good supplants a good,
 Nor beauty undoes beauty. Sophokles
 Will carve and carry a fresh cup, brimful
 Of beauty and good, firm to the altar-foot,
 And glorify the Dionusiad shrine :
 Not clash against this crater on the place
 Where the God put it when his mouth had drained,
 To the last dregs, libation life-blood-like, 2410
 And praised Euripides for evermore—
The Human with his droppings of warm tears.

Still, since one thing may have so many sides,
 I think I see how,—far from Sophokles,—
 You, I, or anyone might mould a new
 Admetos, new Alkestis. Ah, that brave
 Bounty of poets, the one royal race
 That ever was, or will be, in this world !
 They give no gift that bounds itself and ends
 I' the giving and the taking : theirs so breeds 2420

I' the heart and soul o' the taker, so transmutes
The man who only was a man before,
That he grows godlike in his turn, can give—
He also : share the poets' privilege,
Bring forth new good, new beauty, from the old.
As though the cup that gave the wine, gave, too,
The God's prolific giver of the grape,
That vine, was wont to find out, fawn around
His footstep, springing still to bless the dearth,
At bidding of a Mainad. So with me : 2430
For I have drunk this poem, quenched my thirst,
Satisfied heart and soul—yet more remains !
Could we too make a poem ? Try at least,
Inside the head, what shape the rose-mists take !

When God Apollon took, for punishment,
A mortal form and sold himself a slave
To King Admetos till a term should end,—
Not only did he make, in servitude,
Such music, while he fed the flocks and herds,
As saved the pasturage from wrong or fright, 2440
Curing rough creatures of ungentleness :
Much more did that melodious wisdom work
Within the heart o' the master : there, ran wild
Many a lust and greed that grow to strength
By preying on the native pity and care,
Would else, all undisturbed, possess the land.

And these, the God so tamed, with golden tongue,
That, in the plenitude of youth and power,
Admetos vowed himself to rule thenceforth
In Pherai solely for his people's sake, 2450

Subduing to such end each lust and greed
That dominates the natural charity.

And so the struggle ended. Right ruled might :
And soft yet brave, and good yet wise, the man
Stood up to be a monarch ; having learned
The worth of life, life's worth would he bestow
On all whose lot was cast, to live or die,
As he determined for the multitude.
So stands a statue : pedestalled sublime,
Only that it may wave the thunder off, 2460
And ward, from winds that vex, a world below.

And then,—as if a whisper found its way
E'en to the sense o' the marble,—' Vain thy vow !
The royalty of its resolve, that head
Shall hide within the dust ere day be done :
That arm, its outstretch of beneficence,
Shall have a speedy ending on the earth :
Lie patient, prone, while light some cricket leaps
And takes possession of the masterpiece,
To sit, sing louder as more near the sun. 2470
For why ? A flaw was in the pedestal ;
Who knows ? A worm's work ! Sapped, the certain
fate
O' the statue is to fall, and thine to die ! '

Whereat the monarch, calm, addressed himself
To die, but bitterly the soul outbroke—
' O prodigality of life, blind waste
I' the world, of power profuse without the will
To make life do its work, deserve its day !

My ancestors pursued their pleasure, poured
 The blood o' the people out in idle war, 2480
 Or took occasion of some weary peace
 To bid men dig down deep or build up high,
 Spend bone and marrow that the king might feast
 Entrenched and buttressed from the vulgar gaze.
 Yet they all lived, nay, lingered to old age :
 As though Zeus loved that they should laugh to scorn
 The vanity of seeking other ends
 In rule than just the ruler's pastime. They
 Lived ; I must die.'

And, as some long last moan
 Of a minor suddenly is propped beneath 2490
 By note which, new-struck, turns the wail, that was,
 Into a wonder and a triumph, so
 Began Alkestis : ' Nay, thou art to live !
 The glory that, in the disguise of flesh,
 Was helpful to our house,—he prophesied
 The coming fate : whereon, I pleaded sore
 That he,—I guessed a God, who to his couch
 Amid the clouds must go and come again,
 While we were darkling,—since he loved us both,
 He should permit thee, at whatever price, 2500
 To live and carry out to heart's content
 Soul's purpose, turn each thought to very deed,
 Nor let Zeus lose the monarch meant in thee.'

'To which Apollon, with a sunset smile,
 Sadly—" And so should mortals arbitrate !
 It were unseemly if they aped us Gods,
 And, mindful of our chain of consequence,
 Lost care of the immediate earthly link :

Forwent the comfort of life's little hour,
In prospect of some cold abysmal blank 2510
Alien eternity,—unlike the time
They know, and understand to practise with,—
No,—our eternity—no heart's blood, bright
And warm outpoured in its behoof, would tinge
Never so palely, warm a whit the more :
Whereas retained and treasured—left to beat
Joyously on, a life's length, in the breast
O' the loved and loving—it would throb itself
Through, and suffuse the earthly tenement,
Transform it, even as your mansion here 2520
Is love-transformed into a temple-home
Where I, a God, forget the Olympian glow,
I' the feel of human richness like the rose :
Your hopes and fears, so blind and yet so sweet
With death about them. Therefore, well in thee
To look, not on eternity, but time :
To apprehend that, should Admetos die,
All, we Gods purposed in him, dies as sure :
That, life's link snapping, all our chain is lost.
And yet a mortal glance might pierce, methinks, 2530
Deeper into the seeming dark of things,
And learn, no fruit, man's life can bear, will fade :
Learn, if Admetos die now, so much more
Will pity for the frailness found in flesh,
Will terror at the earthly chance and change
Frustrating wisest scheme of noblest soul,
Will these go wake the seeds of good asleep
Throughout the world : as oft a rough wind sheds
The unripe promise of some field-flower,—true !
But loosens too the level, and lets breathe 2540

A thousand captives for the year to come.
Nevertheless, obtain thy prayer, stay fate!
Admetos lives—if thou wilt die for him."

‘ So was the pact concluded that I die,
And thou live on, live for thyself, for me,
For all the world. Embrace and bid me hail,
Husband, because I have the victory—
Am, heart, soul, head to foot, one happiness ! ’

Whereto Admetos, in a passionate cry,
 'Never, by that true word Apollon spoke ! 2550
 All the unwise wish is unwished, oh wife !
 Let purposes of Zeus fulfil themselves,
 If not through me, then through some other man !
 Still, in myself he had a purpose too,
 Inalienably mine, to end with me :
 This purpose—that, throughout my earthly life,
 Mine should be mingled and made up with thine,—
 And we two prove one force and play one part
 And do one thing. Since death divides the pair,
 'Tis well that I depart and thou remain 2560
 Who wast to me as spirit is to flesh :
 Let the flesh perish, be perceived no more,
 So thou, the spirit that informed the flesh,
 Bend yet awhile, a very flame above
 The rift I drop into the darkness by,—
 And bid remember, flesh and spirit once
 Worked in the world, one body, for man's sake.
 Never be that abominable show
 Of passive death without a quickening life—
 Admetos only, no Alkestis now ! ' 2570

Then she : ' O thou Admetos, must the pile
Of truth on truth, which needs but one truth more
To tower up in completeness, trophy-like,
Emprize of man, and triumph of the world,
Must it go ever to the ground again
Because of some faint heart or faltering hand,
Which we, that breathless world about the base,
Trusted should carry safe to altitude,
Superimpose o' the summit, our supreme
Achievement, our victorious coping-stone ? 2580
Shall thine, Beloved, prove the hand and heart
That fail again, flinch backward at the truth
Would cap and crown the structure this last time,—
Precipitate our monumental hope
And strew the earth ignobly yet once more ?
See how, truth piled on truth, the structure wants,
Waits just the crowning truth I claim of thee !
Wouldst thou, for any joy to be enjoyed,
For any sorrow that thou mightst escape,
Unwill thy will to reign a righteous king ? 2590
Nowise ! And were there two lots, death and life,—
Life, wherein good resolve should go to air,
Death, whereby finest fancy grew plain fact
I' the reign of thy survivor,—life or death ?
Certainly death, thou choosest. Here stand I
The wedded, the beloved one : hadst thou loved
Her who less worthily could estimate
Both life and death than thou ? Not so should say
Admetos, whom Apollon made come court
Alkestis in a car, submissive brutes 2600
Of blood were yoked to, symbolizing soul
Must dominate unruly sense in man.

Then shall Admetos and Alkestis see
Good alike, and alike choose, each for each,
Good,—and yet, each for other, at the last,
Choose evil ? What ? thou soundest in my soul
To depths below the deepest, reachest good
In evil, that makes evil good again,
And so allottest to me that I live
And not die—letting die, not thee alone, 2610
But all true life that lived in both of us ?
Look at me once ere thou decree the lot ! ’

Therewith her whole soul entered into his,
He looked the look back, and Alkestis died.

And even while it lay, i’ the look of him,
Dead, the dimmed body, bright Alkestis’ soul
Had penetrated through the populace
Of ghosts, was got to Koré,—throned and crowned
The pensive queen o’ the twilight, where she dwells
Forever in a muse, but half away 2620
From flowery earth she lost and hankers for,—
And there demanded to become a ghost
Before the time.

Whereat the softened eyes
Of the lost maidenhood that lingered still
Straying among the flowers in Sicily,
Sudden was startled back to Hades’ throne
By that demand : broke through humanity
Into the orbéd omniscience of a God,
Searched at a glance Alkestis to the soul,
And said—while a long slow sigh lost itself 2630
I’ the hard and hollow passage of a laugh :

'Hence, thou deceiver ! This is not to die,
If, by the very death which mocks me now,
The life, that's left behind and past my power,
Is formidably doubled. Say, there fight
Two athletes, side by side, each athlete armed
With only half the weapons, and no more,
Adequate to a contest with their foe :
If one of these should fling helm, sword and shield
To fellow—shieldless, swordless, helmless late— 2640
And so leap naked o'er the barrier, leave
A combatant equipped from head to heel,
Yet cry to the other side " Receive a friend
Who fights no longer ! " " Back, friend, to the
fray ! "
Would be the prompt rebuff ; I echo it.
Two souls in one were formidable odds :
Admetos must not be himself and thou ! '

And so, before the embrace relaxed a whit,
The lost eyes opened, still beneath the look ;
And lo, Alkestis was alive again, 2650
And of Admetos' rapture who shall speak ?

So, the two lived together long and well.
But never could I learn, by word of scribe
Or voice of poet, rumour wafts our way,
That—of the scheme of rule in righteousness,
The bringing back again the Golden Age,
Which, rather than renounce, our pair would die—
That ever one faint particle came true,
With both alive to bring it to effect :
Such is the envy Gods still bear mankind ! 2660

So might our version of the story prove,
 And no Euripidean pathos plague
 Too much my critic-friend of Syracuse.

' Besides your poem failed to get the prize :
 (That is, the first prize : second prize is none).
 Sophokles got it ! ' Honour the great name !
 All cannot love two great names ; yet some do :
 I know the poetess who graved in gold,
 Among her glories that shall never fade,
 This style and title for Euripides,
The Human with his droppings of warm tears.

2670

I know, too, a great Kaunian painter, strong
 As Herakles, though rosy with a robe
 Of grace that softens down the sinewy strength
 And he has made a picture of it all.
 There lies Alkestis dead, beneath the sun,
 She longed to look her last upon, beside
 The sea, which somehow tempts the life in us
 To come trip over its white waste of waves,
 And try escape from earth, and fleet as free.
 Behind the body, I suppose there bends
 Old Pheres in his hoary impotence ;
 And women-wailers, in a corner crouch
 —Four, beautiful as you four—yes, indeed !—
 Close, each to other, agonizing all,
 As fastened, in fear's rhythmic sympathy,
 To two contending opposite. There strains
 The might o' the hero 'gainst his more than match,
 —Death, dreadful not in thew and bone, but like
 The envenomed substance that exudes some dew

2680

2690

Whereby the merely honest flesh and blood
Will fester up and run to ruin straight,
Ere they can close with, clasp and overcome
The poisonous impalpability
That simulates a form beneath the flow
Of those grey garments ; I pronounce that piece
Worthy to set up in our Poikilé !

And all came,—glory of the golden verse,
And passion of the picture, and that fine
Frank outgush of the human gratitude 2700
Which saved our ship and me, in Syracuse,—
Ay, and the tear or two which slipt perhaps
Away from you, friends, while I told my tale,
—It all came of this play that gained no prize !
Why crown whom Zeus has crowned in soul before ?

NOTES

P. 3. Our Euripides the human, etc. From Mrs. Browning's 'Wine of Cyprus.'

P. 3, l. 2. Kameiros. A Dorian town on the west coast of the island of Rhodes, the principal town before the foundation of Rhodes the town.

P. 3, l. 5. Petale, Phullis, Charope, Chrusion. Girl-friends of Balaustion; inventions of the poet, not historical characters.

P. 3, l. 7. Nikias. 470-413 B.C. See Introduction.

P. 3, l. 14. the League. The Peloponnesian Confederacy against Athens. It was headed by Sparta, and included all the states of the Peloponnese, except Argos and Achaea, and also states outside, like Megara, Phocis, Boeotia and Locris, which had been allies of Athens and members of its Delian League.

P. 3, l. 17. Knidos. Town in Caria, Asia Minor, famous for the statue of Aphrodité (Venus) by Praxiteles in one of its temples.

P. 4, l. 21. Ilissian. The Ilissus is a river running near Athens. Ilissian means, therefore, Athenian.

P. 4, l. 29. gate of Diomedes or the Hippadai. These names seem of very doubtful authority. Smith's *Dict. of Greek and Roman Geography* mentions a Diomeian Gate and also an Equestrian Gate (Hippades Pulai): these are apparently the gates intended by Browning.

P. 4, l. 32. Lakonia. Sparta.

P. 4, l. 33. Choës. Means 'the Pitchers' and is the second day of the feast of Anthesterion, one of the four Attic festivals in honour of Dionysus.

P. 4, l. 33. Chutroi. Means 'the Pots,' and is the third day of the same festival.

P. 4, l. 24. Agora. The market-place, the centre of the religious, commercial and political life of the city, as the Forum was later of Rome.

P. 4, l. 34. Dikasteria. Tribunals.

P. 4, l. 34. **Poikilé.** 'Adorned Porch': a portico at Athens, so called because it contained a number of paintings of the gods and public benefactors.

P. 4, l. 35. **Pnux.** A hill in Athens, west of the Acropolis, and about 300 feet high. It was a meeting-place of the Athenian democracy.

P. 4, l. 35. **Keramikos.** There were two suburbs of Athens of this name, the outer and inner.

P. 4, l. 35. **Salamis.** An island off the coast of Attica, captured by the Athenians and the scene of the famous defeat of the Persian fleet of Xerxes by the Greek navies in 480 B.C.

P. 4, l. 36. **Psuttalia.** A small island near Salamis.

P. 4, l. 36. **Marathon.** A town in Attica, famous as the scene of the decisive victory of the Athenians over the Persians in 490 B.C.

P. 4, l. 37. **Dionusiæ theatre.** Situated beneath the south side of the Acropolis. Greek tragedy arose from processional anthems in honour of Dionysus.

P. 4, l. 39. **Aischulos.** 525-456 B.C. The first, in time, of the three great Athenian tragedians. He fought against the Persians at Salamis and Marathon. The chief note of his dramatic style is grandeur of thought and imagery. He is said to have introduced scenery and stage appliances.

P. 4, l. 39. **Sophokles.** 497-406 or 405 B.C. Second of the tragedians, famous for his personal beauty, his amiable character, his political qualities, and his pre-eminent poetical genius. He introduced a third actor in his plays, thus making the actors and not the Chorus the chief element in the drama. His best plays are distinguished by the perfection of their plots.

P. 4, l. 39. **Euripides.** 485 or 480-406 B.C. See Introduction.

P. 4, l. 43. **Kaunos.** One of the chief cities of Caria and founded by the Cretans.

P. 4, l. 50. **Point Malea.** The south-easternmost point of Greece, notorious for storms and bad weather.

P. 5, l. 63. **Lokrian.** Lokris was a district on the north shore of the Corinthian gulf.

P. 6, l. 85. **stadia.** A 'stadium' was a measure of 600 Greek feet, equal to 606½ English feet. The standard length was the Olympic Stadium.

P. 6, l. 87. **Ortugia's self.** A small island at the mouth of the harbour of Syracuse.

P. 6, l. 106. **captives.** See Introduction.

P. 7, l. 123. **ossifrage.** Literally, 'bone-breaker.' This is the name in Pliny's *Natural History* for a bird of prey which may be the Lammergeyer or Geir Eagle; but it has sometimes been identified, as by Browning here, with the osprey or fish-hawk.

P. 7, l. 135. **salpinx.** An ancient Greek trumpet.

P. 7, l. 140. **Gulippos.** A Spartan who came to the assistance of the Syracusans in 414 and led their defence against and ultimate victory over the Athenians.

P. 7, l. 145. **Region of the Steed!** A sneer at the Athenian tradition that Athene and Poseidon had contended for the possession of Attica, and Poseidon had caused a horse, Athene an olive, to spring from the soil.

P. 8, l. 167. **rhesis.** Lit. a proverb. Here a line of verse containing a weighty saying.

P. 8, l. 169. **monostich.** Properly a poem or epigram consisting of a single metrical line; perhaps used here for 'stichomuthia,' a brisk dialogue in single lines, of which there are several examples in this play.

P. 9, l. 184. **Owl-shield.** The shield of Pallas Athene, patron goddess of Athens, bore an owl representing wisdom as her peculiar attribute.

P. 9, l. 185. **Sacred Anchor!** A Greek proverbial expression for 'the last hope.'

P. 10, l. 210. **Rosy Isle.** Rhodes. A translation of the Greek name for the island.

P. 10, l. 222. **archonship.** The archon was the chief magistrate in Athens. It was customary for the writer of the *Chorus* to train the Chorus for its representation, in fact to teach the play in its entirety.

P. 10, l. 225. **Lenean feast.** Held in Athens in honour of Dionysus between the 28th and 31st of January.

P. 11, l. 256. **Talent.** In silver. The Athenian talent of the time was equal to about £200 in our present money.

P. 12, l. 271. **Peiraeus.** The chief harbour of Athens,

P. 12, l. 272. **Anthesterion-month.** February-March.

P. 12, l. 284. **Agathon.** Born 448 B.C. A tragic poet of Athens and friend of Euripides and of Plato.

P. 12, l. 284. **Iophon.** Son of Sophocles, and himself a tragic poet of eminence.

P. 12, l. 285. **Kephisophon.** A contemporary poet.

P. 12, l. 293. **Sokrates.** 469-399 B.C. The great philosopher, friend of Euripides.

P. 14, l. 338. **Baccheion.** The temple of Dionysus.

P. 15, l. 367. to drudge awhile. Apollo was made to serve King Admetus for a year as herdsman for having slain the Cyclops in revenge for their slaying of his son Asclepius at Zeus' command.

P. 15, l. 383. Moirai. The Fates—Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos—represented as old women spinning, measuring and cutting the thread of man's life.

P. 15, l. 384. Pheres. Son of Cretheus and Tyro, founder of the town of Pherae in Thessaly, and father of Admetus and three other children.

P. 19, l. 476. Eurustheus. King of Mycenae, empowered to lay the 'twelve labours' on Herakles.

P. 19, l. 477. a chariot with its steeds. See below, note on Thracian Diomedes' car.

P. 19, l. 489. rites o' the sword. The cutting of the hair of the dead.

P. 20, l. 516. Paian. 'Healer.' A name given to Apollo and to the hymn sung in his honour; whence our word 'paean.'

P. 21, l. 524. hallowed vase. Vessels of lustral water were placed, as a part of Greek funeral rites, beside the corpse, so that all those who passed in and out might sprinkle themselves.

P. 21, l. 526. clipt locks. The mourners also cut off locks of their own hair as a sign of grief. These were either scattered about the floor or hung up with branches of laurel and acanthus over the doorway.

P. 21, l. 539. To Lukia or the sand-waste, Ammon's seat. Lycia was a country in Asia Minor. Ammon was a form of Zeus worshipped in Lybia and Upper Egypt, near the sand-waste of the Sahara.

P. 22, l. 580. Mistress. Hestia, the Greek goddess of the hearth and home.

P. 24, l. 642. peplos' fold. The peplos was the outermost garment of the Athenian woman.

P. 26, l. 676. I believe, the sword...Its office. The construction is a broken one, meaning the same as 'the sword's office.'

P. 26, l. 685. pharos. A veil covering the eyes.

P. 26, l. 704. all that coin. *i.e.* Alcestis' life.

P. 27, l. 728. Iolkos. A town in Thessaly, ruled over by Pelias, Alcestis' father.

P. 27, l. 729. wretched one! In the sense of 'unfortunate,' not contemptuously.

P. 27, l. 733. Charon. Ferryman of the dead over the Styx. Son of Erebus and Night.

P. 32, l. 866. Koré. Persephone, queen of Hades.

P. 32, l. 868. **Plouton's dog.** The three-headed Cerberus that guarded the entrance to Pluto's palace in Hades.

P. 34, l. 924. 'Child . . . child !' That is, Alcestis addresses first one, then the other of her two children.

P. 34, l. 929. **We . . .** The plural of royalty.

P. 37, l. 996. **Acherontian lake.** See Milton, *Paradise Lost*. ii. 577-581 :

' Abhorred Styx, the flood of deadly hate ;
Sad Acheron of sorrow, black and deep ;
Cocytus, named of lamentation loud
Heard on the rueful stream ; fierce Phlegethon,
Whose waves of torrent fire inflame with rage.'

P. 37, l. 1003. **Karneian month.** August-September. A festival was then held in honour of Apollo Karneus, protector of flocks.

P. 37, l. 1010. **Kokutos' stream.** See 'Acherontian lake' above.

P. 39, l. 1078. **threnody.** A song of lamentation for the dead.

P. 40, l. 1093. **Thrakian Diomedes' car.** Diomedes, king of Thrace, fed his horses on human flesh. One of Heracles' labours was to destroy him and bring back the car and horses.

P. 41, l. 1115. **Arês.** The war-god, identified by the Romans with Mars.

P. 41, l. 1122. **Lukaon.** A mythical king of Arcadia.

P. 42, l. 1123. **Kuknos.** Son of Mars and Pelopia.

P. 47, l. 1261. **lyric Puthian.** Apollo, called Pythian from his having overcome the great python formerly worshipped at Delphi, which then became Apollo's oracle. Being the god of music, he accompanies his own singing on the lyre.

P. 47, l. 1268. **Othrus' dell.** Othrys in Thessaly was a wild mountain tract where not only wild beasts but also centaurs were supposed to dwell.

P. 48, l. 1282. **Pelion's shore.** Pelion was a mountain in Magnesia, connected with the story of the giants Otus and Ephialtes who were killed by Apollo while striving to attack the Olympians by piling Pelion on Olympus and Ossa on Pelion.

P. 57, l. 1559. **Brother Akastos.** Son of Pelias and brother of Alcestis. Had formerly made war against Admetus.

P. 59, l. 1597. **Hermes the infernal.** Son of Zeus and Maia, was guide to the dead in Hades as well as messenger of the upper gods.

P. 62, l. 1697. **the Turannos.** The tyrant, *i.e.* the king, Admetus.

P. 63, l. 1717. **Ai, Ai, Phcu, phcu, e, papai.** 'Woe, woe, alas, alas, oh strange !'

P. 63, l. 1735. the pest o' the marish. The hydra of Lerna which ravaged the country. It had nine heads, of which the middle one was immortal. As each head was struck off by Heracles' club, two grew in its place, till, as a last resort, he burnt the mortal heads and buried the immortal one under a great rock.

P. 65, l. 1801. Kupris. The Cyprian, *i.e.* Aphrodite, worshipped in Cyprus.

P. 69, l. 1883. That daughter of Elektruon, Tiruns' child Almené, mother of Heracles by Zeus, was daughter of Electryon, king of Tiryns, a city in Argolis.

P. 75, l. 2064. Thrakian tablets, Orphic voice. Orpheus, the singer whose voice charmed all Nature, was connected with Thrace, where arose the Orphic religious mysteries and a literature, originally written on tablets preserved in the temple and treating of medicine, plants, etc.

P. 75, l. 2066. Phoibos. Apollo was also the god of medicine.

P. 75, l. 2066. Asklepiadae. The sons and descendants of Asklepios, to whom Apollo first taught the mysteries of medicine.

P. 75, l. 2075. Chaluboi. More commonly, Chalubes. A people of Asia Minor dwelling near Pontus on the south shore of the Black Sea and occupied in working iron mines; hence our modern word 'chalybeate' for mineral springs containing iron.

P. 85, l. 2353. And save, that sire, his offspring to the end! *i.e.* May Zeus save Heracles, his offspring, to the end!

P. 87, l. 2408. crater. A large bowl in which the wine was mixed with water and from which the cups were filled.

P. 88, l. 2430. Mainad. A priestess of Dionysus.

P. 90, l. 2494. The glory that, in the disguise of flesh. Apollo.

P. 96, l. 2672. a great Kaunian painter. Here represents Lord Leighton, whose painting here described is given as the frontispiece. There was an actual Greek painter of Kaunos, Protogenes (fl. 332-300 B.C.), of whose rivalry with Apelles a famous story is told.

P. 97, l. 2697. our Poikilé. *i.e.* the National Gallery in London.

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